

IV

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Participatory Approach to Assess
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The University of South Florida, a Research Extensive metropolitan university with more than 35,000 students, introduced its first learning community (LC) in 1995. Nearly a decade ago, the dean of arts and sciences became interested in offering an alternative pedagogical structure to the traditional general education curriculum to our entering freshmen. He envisioned a supportive, collaborative environment in which cohorts of students would gain multiple perspectives and faculty and students would learn from each other—in short, a learning community. A federal Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant supported the introduction of six, two-year coordinated studies learning communities over the three-year grant period. These communities were to be team-taught by four to six faculty and teaching assistants, representing different disciplines. Each team determined the degree to which they collaborated in the classroom, with some having two instructors leading the class and others designating one instructor as the lead instructor, with the other instructors offering perspectives from their disciplines.

To date, eighteen communities of approximately forty students have completed most of their general education requirements in the learning community by enrolling in six to nine hours per semester, while also enrolling in traditional classes. Each learning community has had a designated advisor to ensure the articulation of LC courses with students' particular degree requirements, and to facilitate the resolution of social and academic concerns. At the close of the 2002-03 academic year, approximately 550 students had completed two years in USF's Learning Community Program. Teresa L. Flateby is director of evaluation and testing at the University of South Florida.

The learning communities at the University of South Florida and their evaluation began in 1995 with an external, administration-directed orientation, but over time evolved into a rich and participatory process. This chapter describes the metamorphosis of our evaluation efforts from an evaluation perspective to an assessment perspective, and also recounts the changes made in the learning community program that our assessment findings stimulated. As the director of evaluation and testing at the University of South Florida, I was involved with the learning community evaluation effort from the start. Table 1 (pages 52-53) summarizes the evolution of our learning community assessment activities, from a primarily external, but responsive evaluation to a participatory assessment. The evaluation/assessment objectives, methods used, evaluators, and evaluation/assessment focus are presented by each academic year from 1995 through 2001. It is notable that as assessment efforts continued, we also became more process, or improvement, oriented. I will recount how our assessment activities unfolded, year by year, and then reflect on the key lessons learned.

Table 1.
Moving from Responsive Evaluation to Participatory Assessment of Learning Communities

Attribute	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999
Evaluation Model	Responsive	Responsive	Responsive	Participatory
Evaluation/Assessment Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describing LC 1 Assessing Basic Outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describing LCs 1-3 including Cognitive Levels in Classroom Assessing Basic Outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describing LCs 2-6 including Cognitive Levels in Classroom Assessing Basic Outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describing LCs 4-9 including Cognitive Levels in Classroom Assessing Basic Outcomes Role of Instructors in Each LC
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observations Questionnaires Individual Student Interviews Holistic Writing Assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observations Questionnaires Individual Student Interviews Holistic Writing Assessment Focus Group Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observations Questionnaires Individual Student Interviews Holistic Writing Assessment Focus Group Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observations Questionnaires (Traditional Student and Alumni) Exit Interviews
Evaluators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "External" Evaluator One Graduate Assistant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "External" Evaluator Two Graduate Assistants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "External" Evaluator Two Graduate Assistants 	Evaluation Team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment Director/ formerly External Evaluator Faculty Academic Advisor Student Representative Graduate Student
Evaluation/Assessment Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student Satisfaction Writing Quality Classroom Description Identification of Students Well-Suited to LC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student Satisfaction Writing Quality Classroom Description Identification of Students Well-Suited to LC Faculty Characteristics Appropriate for the LC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student Satisfaction Writing Quality Classroom Description Identification of Students Well-Suited to LC Faculty Characteristics Appropriate for the LC Attitudes of LC Alumni 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student Satisfaction Writing Quality Classroom Description Identification of Students Well-Suited to LC approach Faculty Characteristics Appropriate for LC approach Attitudes of LC Alumni Planning and Grading of Writing and Informative Literary Assignments Retention, including GPA's Nature of interaction in the classroom
Reporting Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal Year End 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal Year End 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal Year End Short Timely Summaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Web Site Short Timely Summaries A-team Representative at LC Faculty Meeting Interim Summary Reports

Attribute	1999-2000	2000-2001
Evaluation Model	Participatory	Participatory
Evaluation/Assessment Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe LCs 7-12, including cognitive levels encouraged Identify directions of classroom (instructor/ student) communication Assess outcomes including retention, writing performance, students' impression of LC experiences and their change Describe change in students' perceptions resulting from teaching from multiple perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe LCs 10-15, including types of student/ faculty interaction, cognitive levels encouraged, and effects of presenting multiple perspectives on an issue Assess Cognitive and Intellectual development Gain a deeper understanding of factors contributing to a successful LC Assess impact of service learning Assess outcomes, including retention and quality of writing
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observations Questionnaires (Traditional Student and Alumni) Exit Interviews Faculty and TA focus groups Stakeholder Assessment questionnaire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethnographic observations in three LCs Faculty interviews Entering Student Expectation Survey Focus group interviews, with non-focus group participants responding in writing to same questions Holistic Writing Assessment Analytic Writing Assessment and Measures of Intellectual Development (MID) Quality of writing and intellectual development level (Measures of Intellectual Development)
Evaluators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment Team, including Assessment Director, Faculty, TAs, Academic Advisor, Students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment Team, including Assessment Director, Faculty, TAs, Academic Advisor, Students
Evaluation/Assessment Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' perception of their LC experiences Levels of cognition encouraged in classroom Directions of communication: faculty/student, student/faculty, and student/student Writing performance compared with Composition II students Effects of teaching from multiple perspectives on students' attitudes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' perceptions of their LC experiences Levels of cognition encourages in the classroom Directions of communication: faculty/student, student/ faculty, student/student Effects of teaching from multiple perspectives on students' attitudes Intellectual levels reached Impact of service learning on students' learning Writing performance compared with Composition II students
Reporting Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal Year End Website Short Timely Summaries A-team Representative at LC Faculty Meetings Interim Summary Reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal Year End Website Short Summaries after each method of data collection; e.g., focus groups A-team Representative at LC Faculty Meetings Interim Summary Reports

The Beginning

Because the learning community initiative was in its infancy and was evolving and expanding, I reasoned that the evaluation effort should evolve along with the initiative, adapting to program revisions.

The learning community curriculum structure initiated at USF was a full two years of general education coursework in a team-taught coordinated studies model funded by a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant. The program's intention was to engage a cohort of fifty students in an integrated, supportive learning environment resembling a small liberal arts college. Each learning community (LC) was composed of a different faculty team and often had distinctive interdisciplinary themes; we numbered rather than named each learning community offering. When "Learning Community 1" was introduced, five faculty members from the sciences, humanities, and social sciences integrated their instruction. Although this offering did not have a specific theme, the faculty team worked closely to connect the course content. Writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC), in which writing is taught within the context of a particular discipline, was and still is an important component of every LC program. Because the learning community initiative was in its infancy and was evolving and expanding, I reasoned that the evaluation effort should evolve along with the initiative, adapting to program revisions. Robert Stake's responsive evaluation approach (1976), in which the focus and methods of the evaluation develop as more information is gathered and a fuller understanding of the program unfolds, seemed to fit well into the evolving context.

The program goals stated in the FIPSE grant proposal (Table 2, page 67) provided the starting point for shaping the evaluation. According to the grant, the introduction of WAC in the curriculum should result in "improved student writing," which implied a comparison of LC student outcomes to those in traditional freshman composition courses. Other program goals in the FIPSE proposal included the promotion of interdisciplinarity, the improvement of student retention in the university, the improvement of academic performance of minority students, the development of a climate conducive to collaboration for students and faculty, and an appreciation of diverse cultures and ideas. Building on both these stated goals and conversations with the involved faculty and administrators, we decided to examine student satisfaction, classroom activities, writing, and retention during the first year. We used multiple methods to gather data—observations, questionnaires, writing samples, individual interviews, and record analysis—to address the various goals, and to provide the potential for triangulating the results. One doctoral student assisted with data collection and analysis.

In the beginning (1995-96), we examined program documents and information offered by the administrators and faculty to achieve a broader understanding of the LC initiative and expected student outcomes (Patton 1990). In addition, we observed classroom teaching strategies and environmental characteristics at several points during the first term. After synthesizing this information, we developed a questionnaire to assess students' reactions to their LC experience and the university. After testing and refining a questionnaire with feedback from faculty, administrators, and a sample of students, we administered it to students in the LC and for comparative purposes, to students in a sample of traditional classes.

Because writing was taught within the context of different disciplines with faculty members outside the English department involved with writing instruction, the LC students were not experiencing traditional freshman composition. Therefore, the LC administrators supported a comparison of students' writing achievement in the LC with students' writing in traditional English composition classes. Because timed, in-class writing samples afford the opportunity to make comparisons across groups for a particular writing situation, we collected these samples, but realized at the time that this method of writing assessment has limitations (Wolcott, 1998). Specifically, timed, in-class writing is not completely consistent with our WAC approach, which emphasizes the writing process and the value of revision. The essays produced by LC students and the freshman English students in the sample were scored holistically by trained and experienced readers external to the university. To control for some potential contributors to writing achievement, students in the LC and those in traditional English composition were matched on such variables as SAT and ACT scores, USF and high school GPAs, gender, ethnicity, and when possible, credit hours completed.

With the purpose of triangulating results and obtaining a richer, fuller perspective of students' perceptions of the LC, we interviewed randomly selected students to determine their satisfaction with various aspects of their learning community experience. Students gave their reasons for joining the LC and their opinions regarding the accessibility of LC instructors, the teaching strategies experienced, the writing instruction, and the overall learning environment.

When the data collected during year one were analyzed, problems with the writing component emerged from several sources. In focus groups and on questionnaires, students maintained that their writing was not improving, which was corroborated by the results of the timed writing samples. Students also expressed confusion about the grading process and expectations of the different faculty members assessing their papers. We communicated these results to faculty and administrators both orally and in writing. In response, the WAC element of the LC program was revised; one major change was the addition of a teaching assistant to each LC teaching team, who taught a more traditional, structured writing component.

First Evolution

The following year, responding to a greater understanding of the LC environment and the added challenges resulting from the addition of two more LCs, we modified the assessment approach and began to focus on the LC process. Because the integration of content is central to the learning community curriculum as compared to more traditional and often fragmented approaches to instruction, an expected outcome was enhanced higher-order thinking skills. According to Gabelnick, et al., the integration of courses in learning communities allows students to "have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning" (1990, 19). Arguing for the importance of higher-order thinking, Lauren and Michael Resnick asserted in 1992 that if

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student thinking skills are important to faculty members, students must be asked to actively use them; these processes must be assessed. As we deepened our understanding of the learning community approach and the pedagogical intentions of the faculty, we refocused the evaluation to ascertain if faculty teams were encouraging these higher-order thinking skills in the classroom and if these skills were appearing in students' writing.

The first-year evaluation results revealed the need for a consistent assessment of writing and a method to capture higher-order thinking. Elizabeth Metzger, the Learning Community coordinator and an associate professor in the English Department, and I conceived the Cognitive Level and Quality of Writing Assessment (CLAQWA) instrument to assist faculty members whose discipline was not English to assess the quality of writing and judge the cognitive level (Bloom 1956) achieved in students' papers (Flateby and Metzger 1999; 2001). Although the initial version of the instrument was not available for classroom use until the following year (1997-98), the conversations related to its development stimulated faculty to think about the cognitive levels they expected of their students, their development of writing assignments, and their evaluation of writing skills.

The instrument we constructed allowed faculty members to examine a list of operationally defined skills and choose those writing and thinking skills important for a particular writing assignment. Realizing that some faculty members emphasize *learning to write* and others emphasize thinking and *writing to learn* in their writing assignments, we designed the CLAQWA instrument for either or both of these purposes. Also, the use of CLAQWA encourages instructors to develop assignments with deliberate consideration of cognitive levels expected and assists them in assessing the level students reach. Moreover, students find CLAQWA to be especially helpful when they revise papers. (For information about CLAQWA development, see www.usf.edu/ugrads/CLAQWA.)

During the second and third years of the FIPSE grant, in addition to our new focus on higher order thinking skills, two graduate students and I continued to use the original holistic methods to assess the writing of students in the LCs and in comparison writing classes. We continued to revise and administer a student satisfaction questionnaire, and, mirroring the emphasis on community-building in the learning communities, we replaced individual student interviews with focus groups.

Also, we pursued a new direction with in-class observations. Because the direction of classroom communication and the question and response patterns are related to levels of cognition (Williams 1991; Tsui 2001), we decided to focus our observations on the nature of faculty questions and student responses. For example, we noted the questions an instructor asked and recorded if they stimulated factual, application, or analytical responses.

During these two academic years, the findings were consistent across the communities. We learned what students identified as desirable faculty characteristics. We learned that not all communities engaged students in collaboration or fostered higher order thinking; that writing achievement remained inconsistent in some LCs; but, that the faculty members most supportive of students were appreciated.

The Need for Change

In our fourth year of the learning community initiative (1998-99), several factors contributed to a major shift in our assessment approach. First, the addition of new LCs each year was making our evaluation process more complex and time consuming. Second, although our evaluation had become more process oriented in terms of working directly with students and faculty members, although the results had been consistent over time, and although the administrators were supportive of the evaluation efforts, few changes to the LC program were being initiated in response to our findings. Even though we were following typically valued processes and procedures as recommended in the American Evaluation Association's "Guiding Principles for Evaluators" (1998) and communicating the results to program administrators and faculty teams, we were disappointed that these results were minimally used to rethink or redirect the program or to orient new faculty members coming aboard. Although the primary LC stakeholders were informed and consulted during the design, data collection, and reporting phases, we were beginning to see that faculty members had little identification with the evaluation process or the recommendations offered. The LC program administration generally maintained a hands-off approach to LC classrooms, and the faculty teams seemed to view the evaluation as an external product evaluation to satisfy the expectations of the grant and to inform more external audiences.

Reflecting on our situation, we identified three problems. First, we had an ownership problem. Because we had not successfully communicated the evolution of the evaluation's process focus to the faculty members involved in LC teaching and leadership, they retained the attitude that the evaluation had little to do with their work. Second, we had a problem with timing. Since the end-of-fall-semester evaluation report and the annual evaluation reports were very comprehensive documents, they required considerable time to write. Therefore, their distribution several months after semester's end made the information "old news," contributing to their underutilization and undervaluation. Third, we had a faculty development challenge. Faculty members' attitudes also may have been affected by their newness to learning community teaching, combined with limited understanding of program evaluation and assessment as a process of inquiry and a catalyst for improvement.

A Collaborative Approach

To stimulate participation and ownership of the evaluation process and results and to more accurately reflect the collaborative nature of the program, we decided to move in a new direction. We adopted a participatory evaluation approach that would include all stakeholders in evaluation decisions and the evaluation process. According to Bradley Cousins and Lorna Earle (1992), the following five organizational factors contribute to the success of a participatory evaluation:

- placement of value on evaluation
- provision of resources and time to complete the evaluation

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- commitment to organizational learning
- motivation of primary program users to contribute to the evaluation
- willingness and ability of primary users to receive the necessary training to participate in the evaluation

With these factors in mind, we approached the faculty, advisors, administrators, and students from the six operational LCs, described this approach, and asked for volunteers to participate on a formal, ongoing evaluation team. They were curious! Those volunteering represented all six LCs, all the involved disciplines and participants' roles and functions, and included TAs, faculty members, the associate director of the LC program, advisors, and students. During the summer, the evaluation team or assessment team met several times to:

- refine and prioritize LC goals to be assessed
- identify methods and team members responsible for assessing the goals
- provide a data collection schedule to all LC faculty and administration
- design a plan to present and distribute results in a more frequent, and thus more timely manner

In our regularly scheduled meetings during the academic year, the team studied each data collection method prior to implementation. In addition, we created a website to document our activities, including our data-collection schedule and assessment goals. The name we gave ourselves, "the A-team," represented a shift from *evaluation*, with its summative, value-laden and external-audience implications, to *assessment* with more value-neutral and internal improvement connotations.

This collaborative approach to assessment has been fruitful and enlightening, with different viewpoints on the team affecting many of our decisions. This team approach greatly increased communication among the different LCs and allowed us to have greater insight into what was and was not working. Team members became enthusiastic about assessment and its ability to deepen understanding of the learning community approach, build community, and strengthen collaborative efforts. In fact, one faculty member reported that his teaching had vastly improved as a result of his participation in the A-team.

The first task of this newly formed A-team was studying and refining the learning community program goals and objectives. Because we believed that all LC stakeholders—faculty, adjuncts, teaching assistants (TAs), advisors, administrators, and students—should review and understand these goals and objectives, we generated a discussion about the LC goals on the LC faculty listserv and encouraged discussions of these goals in each LC's planning meetings. Table 2, page 67 shows how our original FIPSE grant goals were now evolving. The table lists the original learning community goals as listed in the FIPSE proposal, the reformulation and expansion of these goals with faculty and staff input, and finally those goals selected for assessment by the A-team. This refinement of goals was the first and maybe the most important contribution of the A-team to our learning community assessment program.

The A-team developed more active student goals than were specified in the FIPSE grant, and although it appears that more goals referred to faculty than to

students, the faculty and program goals are directly related to student learning outcomes. The A-team also undertook the often-difficult next step of translating their student and faculty goals into specific objectives for which assessment data would be gathered.

The A-team's First Year Assessment

Once we revisited, finalized, and prioritized the goals for assessment purposes, the A-team developed objectives for the goals with the highest priority and selected methods appropriate for assessing these objectives. We decided to continue the study of outcomes such as satisfaction and students' perceptions of the LC experience, retention, writing skills, and cognitive levels encouraged in the classroom. Retaining most methods and instruments previously used in evaluation, we adapted the questions and focus to reflect our newly stated objectives.

Learning from the mistakes of the earlier evaluations, the A-team developed ways to make our process continuously visible and our results public. A website, maintained by one of the A-team members, communicated the goals and objectives of the program, strategies for ways these objectives were to be assessed, summaries of the results, and even our meeting minutes (www.usf.edu/~lc/assess). An annual report of the results was distributed to the administration and each LC and was posted on our website. In addition and more important, the A-team members regularly, but informally, discussed much of the same information in faculty planning meetings in their respective LCs. Through these informal conversations we discovered the importance of face-to-face communication in building community between the A-team and the larger LC teaching community and eventually toward using the assessment results in the classroom.

Because every A-team member was involved with data collection, faculty development became an integral part of our assessment. Prior to undertaking actual data-collection activities, faculty members read about a particular method such as focus group interviewing or observing. A-teammates also discussed assessment issues and regularly reviewed their procedures before implementation to ensure consistent application of the methods.

As a result of the A-team's first-year efforts, important changes were beginning to occur in the LC program. First, the formulation and public dissemination of the learning community program's objectives were important. Second, making these objectives and associated expectations explicit to students was critical. Learning community advisors, administrators, and faculty developed a "contract" to be signed by incoming students; the contract outlined the nature of the learning community program and specified students' responsibilities. Third, everyone involved in the teaching of writing aligned their writing goals and objectives to reflect more closely the process of writing as thinking and writing to learn, central emphases in the writing-across-the-curriculum program. Also, the associate director of the LC program offered a WAC practicum for graduate teaching assistants.

Probably the most significant instructional consequence of the A-team's efforts was the impact participation had on classroom teaching and learning. The

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faculty representatives on the A-team reported that in the process of observing other LCs, they became more keenly aware of the learning community initiative's overall goals and objectives and the contributing teaching strategies and behaviors of both teachers and students. Often, faculty members witnessed varieties of active student learning, in which students were encouraged to be actively involved in classroom learning, think through questions that demanded application and analysis, and engage in collaborative discussions and team projects. These observations led these teachers to modify their own instruction and ultimately, to comment on how they were becoming better, more reflective instructors. Similarly, the student representatives commented that because of their A-team involvement, they better understood the rationale of the learning community, the intentions of an integrated curriculum, and the value of different instructional methods.

During the second year of the A-team's work, continuing our emphasis on the development of writing skills, we once again administered and scored a timed writing assessment to students completing English Composition II in the LC and in traditional classes. Consistent with previous years, the essays were scored holistically by external, trained, and experienced readers. We matched students according to the same variables identified in previous years and found that the mean score for the LC students in the matched pairs was one point higher on a possible range of scores from two to twelve than the mean for students in traditional classes. Additionally, the range of mean scores for the LC classes was higher than the range of scores for the traditional composition classes, suggesting the success of the LC writing program and a notable improvement from the initial years. More important, the external reviewers were impressed with the maturity and cognitive levels exhibited by the LC students. These observations were unsolicited and, thus, quite powerful.

While retaining several components in our assessment plan in the 1999-2000 year, the fifth year of our LC initiative, we made several changes. Because students appeared to be less satisfied when their expectations were inconsistent with the realities of the program, we developed a survey to assess students' expectations at the beginning of their first year in the LC to identify inconsistencies early so they could be addressed. Also, we significantly modified our focus group process in order to ensure greater participation. Although students were selected for the focus groups, attendance rates were low.

By the year 2000, we had enough retention and academic achievement data to report some patterns over the first five years of the learning community program. Our analysis revealed that while many students left the first LCs—most after the first, some after the second semester—the majority of these students were retained in the university. The retention rates for students who completed the entire two-year learning community program were higher than the university's overall retention rates. In addition, African American females were earning higher grade point averages than any other group in the LC program and LC female students in general were performing at a higher level than their male counterparts in the LC program, a finding consistent with higher education research.

To engage more LC faculty members, we surveyed the LC teaching teams about our assessment efforts and about possible additional assessment questions we might explore. The faculty indicated that our summaries of classroom observations were not that valuable for improving their classroom instruction. This feedback led to some self-examination on the part of the A-team, and we realized in hindsight that our classroom-observation feedback to faculty teams was simply too neutral to be useful. Concerned that LC faculty members would resent comparisons among LCs or our interpretations of the classroom teaching environments, the A-team had made a conscious decision to report observations from each LC individually and to describe the environment completely in our observable terms. The “observable accounts” did not add anything meaningful to instructors’ knowledge nor did it strengthen support of this facet of our assessment work. Another lesson learned.

A-team Self Reflection

During the next year, 2001-02, the A-team, consisting of both existing and new members, examined the previous assessment efforts and made further changes in assessment activities. They agreed to:

1. Modify the focus group interviewing procedures to ensure greater participation. We scheduled these activities to involve all second-year LC students during their class time. We asked students who were not selected to participate in the actual focus group to write responses in class to the same questions asked in the focus group interviews; this allowed us to triangulate the results and also provided valuable points of discussion and reflection in the classroom.
2. Observe fewer LCs more extensively. We decided to ask a LC faculty member, teaching assistant, or advisor to become a participant observer, thus recording a more comprehensive meaningful picture of their respective LCs as compared to the “snapshots” we had been collecting in our shorter classroom observation visits. We hoped this different observation strategy would provide a deeper and more nuanced view of each LC, that could be shared more usefully within the LC teaching team.
3. Add a measure to determine students’ attitudes toward factors related to success in college.

The A-team also was asked to assist with the university’s assessment of its general education curriculum. Students enrolled in a liberal arts “exit course,” taken during their junior or senior year, wrote an essay reflecting upon their attitudes toward gender, race, and ethnicity; values and ethics; environmental issues and global perspectives; and their experiences contributing to these attitudes. Since the LC students also completed an “exit course” during their fourth LC semester as sophomores, they were asked to participate in this reflective writing process as well. Essays from six classes, (two LCs and four general education exit classes), were scored in a blind fashion with holistic scoring rubrics that assess writing performance. Also, essays from ten classes were scored with the Measures of Intellectual Development (Moore 1991) rating

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protocol that is derived from William Perry's scheme of student intellectual development (1970). One LC's writing mean score was in the mid-range of the means from all six classes and one LC had the highest mean score of all six classes. Although an argument could be made that writing is emphasized in the LCs at University of South Florida, and thus LC writing scores should be higher, an alternative argument could be that students in the senior-level exit courses are more advanced and have had even more opportunities to write. Whichever interpretation is favored, students in the LC s appeared to be writing as well, if not better, than students in the liberal arts exit courses. Moreover, the mean intellectual development scores for the LC sections were generally higher than the mean scores for most other sections, even though the LC students were only sophomores and all other students in the assessment sample were juniors or seniors. In fact, one LC section had the highest mean intellectual development score of all ten sections participating. These initial results confirmed our idea (triggered by our perceptions and our in-class observations) that students develop intellectually more quickly in the LC than in the traditional university curriculum.

In 2001-02, the A-team was restructured with the hopes of expanding the assessment focus to allow each learning community to identify an area of investigation specific to its LC and select a representative from each learning community to assist with these investigations. Unfortunately, due to budgetary constraints and a looming decision by the university administration to phase out the two-year learning community model in favor of a one-year linked-course program, the LC faculty and TA interest in the assessment faded. However, the A-team continued the student perception questionnaire, focus groups, observations, writing, and intellectual development assessments.

Discoveries and Lessons Learned

Now seven years into LC assessment at the University of South Florida, our assessment strategies have provided useful instructional and program information regarding both student outcomes and instructional processes. The information has resulted in validation of the LC program and in informed programmatic changes. Table 3, pages 68-71 summarizes the learning community assessment feedback loop including student outcomes and program and curricular changes from 1995 to 2001. Each column reflects results aggregated from all data sources. "Positive Outcomes" are student outcomes identified in questionnaires, focus groups, observations, or student records. "Positive Characteristics" are program qualities perceived by students or observed by the A-team to foster the LC goals. "Suggested Areas for Program Improvement" were identified from students' feedback in focus groups, questionnaires, observations, or records; they pointed to the arenas where the learning community program could be strengthened. "Program Changes" are administrative, programmatic, and instructional changes that resulted from assessment information and feedback. The table reveals improvements as the years progressed and highlights the process emphasis or program improvement elements of the assessment.

In 1995-96, the first year of the LC program, our focus groups and direct writing samples uncovered problems with writing instruction. After addressing these problems, we continued to focus our inquiry on writing by using direct writing assessment and by soliciting student and TA feedback through focus groups and questionnaires; we have solid evidence that the quality of LC students' writing was equal or superior to non-LC students' writing. Furthermore, most LC students considered themselves to be better and more confident writers as a consequence of their LC experience. We also learned how vital English TAs were and are to the success of the LC; they have been found to be a cohesive force in the program and valuable liaisons between students and other instructors. The A-team's connections with the English TAs strengthened the teaching of writing in several ways, including the creation of a graduate practicum in WAC instruction and providing assessment guidance for all teaching assistants in the learning community program.

During the first few years of the LC program, we also discovered that students' expectations of the LC were substantively different than their experiences. They were unprepared for the interdisciplinarity and the academic sophistication of the program. In addition, because they were told the LC would be a community and more informal than traditional classes, many imagined a "Club Med" environment. Two changes resulted from the misalignment of expectations and actual program. First, the recruitment process of LC students and information presented to them were revised to emphasize the academic demands, but also the team-teaching and thematic approach to instruction was emphasized. Second, prospective LC students were asked to sign a letter of intent that described the program and their responsibilities. Both students and teaching teams believed that this greater clarity about LC program goals and expectations influenced the greater initial satisfaction and higher retention rates in the LC than in the first years of the learning communities.

Our findings also allowed us to identify characteristics of successful learning community faculty. A balance between self-confidence and humility is critical for the demands of teaching in front of or with faculty peers. While being self-assured, the successful faculty members need to be open to learning about and respectful of others' disciplines. Not only is it necessary for faculty members to respect one another, they also must respect students and consider them a legitimate source of knowledge and ideas. Since active learning is a hallmark of the LC program, we found that instructors who were only comfortable lecturing and unwilling to try other approaches were not a good match for the demands of the learning community.

Classroom observations led us to notice that LC program intentions and students' intellectual growth appeared to be aligned with William Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development (1970). Consequently, we decided to use the Measures of Intellectual Development (Moore 1991) instrument to assess LC and non-LC students' levels of cognitive maturity demonstrated in their writing. As mentioned previously, LC students' development equaled or surpassed students who were older and had more college experiences. Although many LC faculty members believed intuitively that this intellectual growth occurred, they were gratified when the data confirmed their beliefs.

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A crucial discovery was that the team-approach to assessment engaged both faculty and students. Because faculty members learned systematic ways of studying the communities by participating in the A-team, they developed a deeper understanding of LC purposes, and discovered teaching strategies to fulfill those purposes. Thus, the assessment process contributed to faculty development. Students' participation resulted in discoveries, also. They learned to apply social science research methods to systematically address assessment questions, gained a deeper understanding of learning community philosophy and practice, and probably developed greater self-confidence by working as equals with faculty. In fact, two of the student members presented at a national conference with faculty members.

In retrospect, even though the LC administration was always supportive of the assessment efforts, assembling a team at the outset may have made possible more immediate ownership of the assessment in the LC teaching teams. For assessment results to be useful for improving a program, faculty must be involved with the process and find the results beneficial. On the other hand, undertaking the public work of assessment in a team environment can be threatening, and at the time our LC was initiated, including a team of stakeholders in all phases of the assessment process was unusual.

In addition, we discovered the importance of timely feedback. To be useful and effect programmatic change, results should be communicated succinctly and as quickly as possible. The combination of paper reports, continuous website information, and face-to-face meetings was important to disseminating our work and our findings.

Evaluating the institution's potential for successfully implementing a high quality participatory assessment according to the five characteristics Cousin and Earle introduced (page 57) may provide a way to identify potential barriers to assessment and address these before the assessment is undertaken. Looking back, most of us involved with the A-team believe that the collaborative approach revolved heavily around those elements of commitment, involvement, motivation, and continuous learning. Because faculty development is critical for conducting quality assessment, ongoing orientation and development activities were essential. Each year, we introduced new readings or arranged to attend conferences as a team. Equally important, we learned that assessment team members should be formally recognized for their contributions in the tenure and promotion process. While participation in the assessment activities may provide intrinsic reward, external support should help sustain assessment and foster improvement. Similarly, student members should receive official credit for their efforts because their input and level of participation is often equal to that of other A-team members.

Also in retrospect, we might have connected academic achievement more explicitly with factors linked to the institution's budget. For example, retention rates for students who completed the learning community program were higher than the university's retention rate and their time-to-degree completion was also more rapid than for non-LC students. Our assessment did not capitalize on this

probable cost-savings result. Our A-team also failed to market the LCs' successes. If we had attended to portraying learning community successes in budgetary terms, and to "telling our story" more widely and energetically, the two-year interdisciplinary learning community model may have been retained.

On the other hand, the university is currently reviewing the undergraduate curriculum and is considering such components as inquiry-based instruction, interdisciplinary study, and service-learning, all of which were central pedagogical features of the learning community programs.

Next Chapter

On a personal note, as a result of the team approach to assessment in the learning community program, I developed connections with faculty, administrators, advisors, and students that I otherwise would not have. This same approach of fostering communication and collaboration among the various constituencies has been pivotal in our current assessment of the university's general education curriculum, which I am directing. Through our collective efforts, we have written measurable general education goals, selected and developed methods to assess the goals judged to be the most critical, and suggested curricular improvements and ways to communicate the problems and potential solutions. Although not yet a widely acknowledged element of the institution's fabric, the power of collaborative assessment is slowly being realized.

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TABLE 2
University of South Florida's Learning Community Goals

Goals in FIPSE Grant	LC Goals Developed by Assessment Team	Targeted Goals for Assessment
Student Goals		
<p>Improve Communication Skills: Student will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to write for different contexts, purposes, and audiences. • Master research tools. • Master technology and information resources. 	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve their writing skills. • Become information literate. • Engage in higher order thinking. • Find satisfaction with the LC experience. • Work collaboratively. • Actively participate. • Respect multiple perspectives. • Adopt interdisciplinary approaches. • Make links across disciplines. 	<p>Writing skills: Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express increased comfort with the writing process. • Understand purpose and audience. • Demonstrate the use of process when writing. • Use conventions that meet the expectations of the audience. • Demonstrate several cognitive levels as defined by Bloom and his colleagues in writing. <p>Information literacy Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize information needs. • Locate information. • Evaluate information. • Use information. <p>Find satisfaction with the LC experience. Respect multiple perspectives.</p>
Faculty/Program Goals		
<p>Improve retention in the LC as compared to University's retention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve retention. 	<p>LC Students will be retained at a higher rate than the University's rate.</p>
<p>Improve academic achievement of minority students as compared to their achievement in the University.</p>		
<p>Incorporate WAC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ a variety of disciplinary writing conventions. • Employ writing to understand material. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement processes for achieving writing and information literacy goals. • Use on-line communication tools/strategies. 	
<p>Promote interdisciplinarity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesize content across disciplines. • Understand relationships between disciplines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work to make links across disciplines. • Actively pursue interdisciplinary approaches. • Teach collaboratively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty will make links across disciplines. • Faculty will teach collaboratively.
<p>Establish a productive academic climate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote collaboration, appreciation for diversity, and the scholarly exchange of ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect multiple perspectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty will demonstrate respect in the classroom for their faculty colleagues and students.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ active teaching strategies. • Engage in professional service and publication regarding the LC. • Commit to teaching improvement. • Serve actively outside the classroom on LC development. • Encourage higher order thinking skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty will engage students in the classroom by using active teaching strategies. • Faculty will encourage higher order thinking in the classroom.

TABLE 3
Student Outcomes, Program Perceptions and Program Changes 1995-2000

Positive Outcomes Confirmed With Data	Positive Characteristics	Suggested Areas for Program Improvement	Program Changes
1995-96 Learning Community 1			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' perceptions of the social/emotional qualities of the learning community environment were positive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students viewed faculty as supportive. Team approach to teaching used. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students viewed writing instruction lacking. Students reported receiving limited feedback on papers. Attrition rate higher than expected. Some students reported campus's LC image—"remedial program." Students complained about workload. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decided not to admit students needing preparatory writing classes. Writing quantity de-emphasized. Writing quality emphasized.
1996-97 Learning Communities 1-3			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students perceived deep thinking encouraged in one LC. Students perceived supportive faculty/student interaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrated course content in two LCs. Advisors were viewed as approachable & competent. Most faculty were supportive. Team teaching used in some LCs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' attitudes toward writing instruction (writing across the curriculum). Data suggested certain faculty unsuited for LCs. Students reported lack of feedback on papers. Number of students recommending certain LCs was lower than expected. Lack of course selection was a problem for some students. Lecture identified as the predominant teaching method in some LCs. Rote learning emphasized in some LCs. Some students reported a lack of commitment and responsibility. Absence of rewards affected faculty in some LCs. Some students reported a lack of rigor expected. Students reported disorganization in new LCs, including syllabus changes. Attrition rate still higher than expected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designated a Learning Community for majors within the natural sciences. Faculty stipends for planning were introduced.

TABLE 3. continued
Student Outcomes, Program Perceptions and Program Changes 1995-2000

1997-98 Learning Communities 2-6			
Positive Outcomes	Positive Characteristics	Suggested Areas for Program Improvement	Program Changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students perceived a closeness between students and faculty. • Number of second-year LC students recommending the LC increased. • In most LCs, students believed instructors were enthusiastic about their teaching. • Perception of deeper thinking required in the LCs as compared to perception of students perceptions in traditional classes. • In certain LCs observations and focus groups suggest intellectual maturity as defined by William Perry (1970). • Observation and students' perceptions revealed an acceptance of multiple perspectives in many LCs students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students identified specific faculty as outstanding. • Advisers were viewed as approachable and competent. • Most faculty were supportive. • Interdisciplinary faculty were perceived to collaborate in selected LCs. • Team teaching was observed and reported in some LCs. • Integration of course content was observed in some LCs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certain professors' styles and attitudes toward students were judged negatively. • Certain LCs made few connections across the curriculum. • Disorganization in certain LCs reported. • Attrition problems continue. • Students' expectations of the work demands "excessive." • Prevalent attitude seems to be "What do I need to know for the test?" • Some students complained about others' lack of motivation. • Students reported concerns about writing expectations and inconsistent assessment. • Faculty reported a lack of institutional recognition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less dependence on lecture as primary teaching modality. • More active-teaching strategies employed. • Learning Community for natural science majors discontinued.

TABLE 3. continued
Student Outcomes, Program Perceptions and Program Changes 1995-2000

1998-99 Learning Communities 4-9			
Positive Outcomes	Positive Characteristics	Suggested Areas for Program Improvement	Program Changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High retention rate noted. • Students reported higher level of satisfaction. • Students believed they were being challenged to use deep thinking skills. • Observations and students responses revealed open-mindedness in some LCs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisers were viewed as approachable and competent. • Students identified specific faculty as outstanding. • Most faculty seen as supportive. • Interdisciplinary faculty collaboration observed in most LCs. • Team teaching used in some LCs. • Course material integrated across disciplines in most LCs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retention in 2nd year LC declined. • In one LC, lecture mode dominated; grading inconsistencies; disorganization. • A small number of faculty members were observed to be unsuitable for program. • Students reported a greater workload. • Faculty's expectations of students and assignments in some LCs seen as unduly demanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment Team ("A-team") developed. • Leadership changes (Associate Director appointed). • Student recruiting more accurately reflected intentions of LC program. • Expectations of faculty clarified by administration. • Residential LCs introduced. • LC faculty colloquium initiated. • TA role clarified and designated critical to LC success. • Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) practicum introduced for TAs. • Service learning component included in new LCs. • Writing instruction changed to emphasize process with a commitment to writing-to-learn. • CLAQWA instrument introduced for writing process assessment.

TABLE 3. continued
Student Outcomes, Program Perceptions and Program Changes 1995-2000

1999-2000 Learning Communities 7-12			
Positive Outcomes	Positive Characteristics	Suggested Areas for Program Improvement	Program Changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' reported level of satisfaction was consistently higher than previous years for <i>all</i> LCs. • Students believed they were being challenged to use deep thinking skills. • Students perceived the LC enabled them to become better writers. • Certain LCs exhibited behavior indicating higher intellectual development than more advanced USF students according to Perry's scheme. • Students perceived they were more open-minded to perspectives different than their own. • If problems were identified in LCs, students typically assumed the responsibility for solving them. • Minority females had higher GPAs than minority females in traditional classes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors appeared to respect each other. • Advisers viewed as approachable and competent. • Students identified specific faculty as outstanding. • <i>All</i> faculty were viewed to be supportive. • Interdisciplinary faculty collaboration in most LCs. • Team teaching observed in <i>all</i> LCs. • Integration of material in <i>all</i> LCs. • Students recognized their intellectual growth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One LC did not perceive a sense of community. • Lecture-based, factual presentations appeared to contribute to students in one LC at the "dualistic" (low position on Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development). • Students expressed discomfort with faculty turnover in two LCs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New director appointed. • TAs served as advisors. • Student participation agreement developed, which detailed responsibilities and LC demands. • WAC practicum re-focused. • Service-learning integrated into all LCs. • LC student writing conference sponsored.