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The Assessment Chase:
The Changing Shape of Assessment
in Shaping Change at
Skagit Valley College

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Les Stanwood and Lynn Dunlap

Skagit Valley College is a two-year public institution providing both pre-academic (transfer) and professional/technical degrees and certificates to the citizens of northwestern Washington state. With campuses in Mount Vernon and Oak Harbor (Whidbey Island), Washington, and smaller centers throughout the three counties it serves, the college has about 3,700 FTE students (some 6,000 headcount). Approximately two-thirds of these are seeking the transfer degree, while the rest are pursuing one of more than twenty-five technical specialties.

Learning communities were first introduced in 1986 through faculty initiative. As a result of a review of general education at the college that began in 1987, Skagit Valley College requires learning communities for students who seek the transfer degree. While some developmental courses are included in the program, of the more than seventy learning communities offered in an academic year, the majority pair one or more introductory or general education courses. Beginning with the first learning communities at the college, assessment has been an ongoing part of the Skagit strategy to understand and improve the learning community efforts. Les Stanwood and Lynn Dunlap are English faculty members at the college's Whidbey Island and Mount Vernon campuses. Both have taught in learning communities since 1987 and were members of the General Education Committee that recommended requiring learning communities for degree completion. Currently they serve as the General Education Coordinators on their respective campuses.

While a number of learning communities have been offered at Skagit Valley College since 1987, the current program, which mandates that degree-seeking students take learning communities and linked composition classes, was part of an ambitious general education reform that began in 1989 and culminated in the degree revision of 1993. (See Table 1, page 91, for definitions of learning communities at Skagit.) As a result of this requirement, by 1995, the college was annually providing about seventy learning communities per year. This effort involved more than half of the full-time faculty, scores of part-time instructors, and virtually every college academic department as well as numerous faculty from professional/technical programs. Since 1995, development and monitoring of the learning communities has been our responsibility as the appointed Coordinators of General Education on each of the two main campuses, Whidbey Island and Mount Vernon. Our coordinator duties, for which we receive partial release from teaching, include development of class offerings for coming years, recruitment and training of faculty, promotion of classes, and oversight of the evaluation of the program. We also serve as the co-chairs of the college's General Education Committee, a committee of faculty and administrators who make recommendations about all elements of general education, including learning communities and writing links. Although neither of us had any previous background in assessment, we realized at the outset we would have to take on

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this work as well. Since 1998 the college has also had a director of Institutional Research who is available to all college programs, including General Education.

From the beginning in 1989, our general education reform effort at Skagit Valley College relied on "assessment" that emerged in several forms. The college used about half of a $58,000 annual assessment grant from the State of Washington to pay for reassigned time for the General Education Committee members to conduct research and, more critically, to offer grants of $500 to $2,000 for small faculty teams to examine individual areas in need of reform and to suggest solutions.[1] As a result, we were able to delineate a complex set of desirable outcomes for our students and then plot a course toward producing those. This effort allowed faculty and administration to create a set of general education goals and outcomes that became the cornerstone of the core educational program at Skagit.[2] In addition, our analysis of educational literature and our own practices in the years before we attempted reform, led us to consider which practices would allow us to address the outcomes efficiently.

Although the college was aware that the potential benefits of learning communities include better retention, greater student involvement in campus life, and the energizing of faculty, these were *not* part of the initial rationale for requiring them. Learning communities were suggested as a way to solve curricular problems. In the open discussions about outcomes during 1989 and 1990, many faculty had suggested that students "did not see connections" between and among disciplines. Further, there was a sense that students needed to engage subjects more fully, to see education as a dynamic and interconnected process of exploration and discovery. After it had enumerated its outcomes, the college constructed a set of "Curricular Guidelines" that included a recommendation that students should take courses that combined disciplines, primarily as a way to learn how different modes of inquiry approached the same issues. We therefore initially required that students take at least one each of their required distribution courses (sciences, social sciences, and the arts) in a learning community. [3]

Linked composition was included in requirements primarily to provide composition experience within an academic context. Faculty reports from our Writing Across the Curriculum program and general education brainstorming sessions indicated that students' experiences in English 101 did not seem to lead to greater writing skills in later classes. On the basis of the success of a few limited and optional learning communities involving English composition courses, we made the leap to requiring these experiences for all students seeking the transfer degree.

The narrative that follows describes our assessment efforts in terms of how they have evolved: Early Assessment (the studies leading up to the revision of our degree); The Era of Required Links and Learning Communities (our attempts to evaluate the program once it was implemented); Revisions to the Program (our continuing efforts to assess our program and respond to what we are learning); and Lessons Learned (a summary of our understanding of the paradoxical and political nature of our assessment experience).

Early Assessment

Our first assessment efforts organized around early learning communities were meant largely to provide information for general education reform. With the guidance of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, the college conducted post-learning-community debriefing sessions of the faculty to define a good learning community experience and to improve delivery in future classes. Another assessment examined student retention in the researched essay course (which most students took as their second composition requirement and which was not yet taught in linked format). This study confirmed an extremely high drop-out rate and relatively low success rates for this class, with an average of 32 percent of students enrolled on the 5th day of classes unable to achieve a grade of C-minus or better. Change was needed, so this data served as the baseline against which we measured initial improvements in persistence and success in linked composition courses.

At the Mount Vernon campus, instructors had the good fortune to have two sets of students taking the same exams, one in the "Reading, 'Riting, and Rats" learning community and the other in a stand-alone section of General Psychology. Analysis of student scores showed that although the learning community students entered with lower ASSET scores, they performed at the same level as students in stand-alone classes who had entered with higher ASSET scores.[4]

During the same period, students in a technical research writing class at the Mount Vernon Campus undertook several studies of learning communities and of instructional practices at the college. They printed their results in two booklets, *Current Instructional Practices* (1991) and *Learning Communities: A Study of Types of Learning, Retention, and Perceptions of Students and Faculty in Linked and Coordinated Courses at Skagit Valley College* (1992). All of this data, together with studies done at other community colleges, supported inclusion of learning communities and writing links into our new general education program.

The Era of Required Links and Learning Communities

The beginning of our very ambitious general education program in 1993 was marked by a temporary falling-off in assessment efforts. The management of logistical and technical problems overwhelmed the General Education Committee members and administrators.[5] Some members of the faculty suggested that specific assessments be done during the first two years, recognizing that this period provided a unique window of opportunity to compare students under the old program with those under the new. However, the college did not have the infrastructure to carry out such assessments.[6] Further, in the first two years, the college relied on the work of the General Education Committee and the deans and associate deans to manage the program. In 1995, in preparation for the first year of full implementation,[7] the college created for each campus the position of Coordinator of General Education, responsible for development and supervision of learning communities and writing links on the two main campuses—and for assessment.

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Because during the first three years of the program, faculty, administrators, and students had questions about the value and effectiveness of many aspects of the new, dramatically modified general education package, one of our first jobs as coordinators was to organize an extensive third-year assessment of the entire program. With respect to the learning communities and writing links, assessment studies targeted four main areas:

- Student Learning: Were students in collaborative classes learning? Were they learning as well as their classmates in stand-alone sections?
- Student Response: Did students have positive feelings about their learning community and writing link experiences?
- Faculty Response: Did teaching and counseling faculty have positive feelings about their teaching experiences in learning communities and links, or about the effectiveness of these classes as part of the curriculum?
- Logistical "Nuts and Bolts": Were we doing a good job of *managing* the learning community and writing link program?

Our approach to coordinating this assessment was similar to what we had done in the initial general education assessment: faculty who conducted research were paid stipends funded by State of Washington assessment money. Typically, faculty members, often working in small teams, applied for grants, undertaking projects that required one quarter to one year to complete. The small-project approach was essential to the success of general education reform because it increased the level of involvement of the faculty. Fully half of the school's full-time faculty were involved in some sort of investigation and therefore became invested in the process of general education reform and in the process of reflection on and public discussion about their practices.

Our final report, *Studies on the Implementation and Effectiveness of Skagit Valley College's General Education Program*, summarized an analysis of nineteen separate studies. After a presentation to the General Education Committee during a late-summer retreat, the committee crafted recommendations for changes to the program, including changes to the learning community requirement. (See Appendices A and B (pages, 87-89) for a list of the reports and a summary of elements relevant to learning communities and links.) On the whole, the studies showed broad-based support for our efforts while at the same time suggesting problems with the program and with our assessment strategies.

Although the most frequently asked questions about learning communities are usually those associated with student learning and student retention, the studies of 1995 and 1996 shed little light on student learning. A few studies compared learning community and English writing link students to students who took the same courses as a "stand alone," but the samples were too small and the variables too numerous to provide any definitive evidence. Faculty who taught in Skagit's English writing links and learning communities believed that the collaborative course experience led students to greater confidence in exploring issues and questioning, writing, and thinking rigorously, while students surveyed felt they had increased their understanding of relationships among disciplines. At the same time, studies of overall GPA of students showed that those who took learning communities or writing links early in their college career were earning

lower grades than those who did not. Similar results were found at some other schools where faculty members work closely together as teaching teams in learning communities.[8] In interviews, faculty observed that as they co-designed assignments and assessment of student work, they were integrating course activities and projects and asking for higher-order thinking skills. They also noted that as they discovered agreement about outcomes and what constitutes good work, they were often holding students to higher standards.

Studies of student retention were a bit more promising: students who took a learning community or English writing link in their early quarters at the college were generally more likely to stay in school than those without, although other factors could have accounted for this difference.

This initial study period revealed that we struggled not only with ways to compare learning community and non-learning community students but with defining the outcomes we wanted to assess for these students. For example, although students in learning communities and writing links had wonderful opportunities for growth in interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and independent learning, these "nontraditional" outcomes were difficult to quantify.

On the other hand, we *were* able to identify specific problem areas to address immediately. Studies confirmed, for example, that student resistance to the learning community requirement in technical programs was both strong and widespread. The learning communities were neither designed to appeal to professional and technical students nor scheduled to coordinate with their course-intensive programs. Although some professional/technical faculty designed and taught successful learning communities, most of the faculty in the unit were unconvinced of the value of the requirement. In retrospect, we realized that we had not laid the groundwork for learning communities in these programs as thoughtfully and thoroughly as we had in the transfer programs.

In addition, studies noted that by limiting the required courses to English writing links and to learning communities defined as paired courses from the distribution requirements, many faculty members felt excluded from participation, in particular counselors, librarians, and faculty members who teach math, speech, languages, and developmental-level courses. It became evident as well that the college had no mechanism for ensuring the success of learning communities and writing links in some delivery methods (for example, in evening and distance education classes) and that students did not fully understand the degree requirements and the rationale for these collaborative courses. Finally, the studies suggested that perceptions of the success of courses in the program were highly variable, apparently dependent on when or where courses were offered or by whom.

Subsequently, the General Education Committee recommended directing college resources toward increased faculty support and district-wide assessments. We began to codify best practices for learning communities and writing links, which we identified by the umbrella term "collaborative courses." A number of faculty members wrote faculty handbooks about general education components, including learning communities and writing links, while other faculty provided stories and articles for the in-house *Teaching & Learning* newsletter. In addition

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to offering workshops, the coordinators developed guidelines and "tip sheets" about assessment feedback—particularly from students—and suggested how faculty members could use that information to improve the effectiveness of course and assignment design.

While the overall results were not definitive in every respect, they provided us with the basis for specific steps to improve the program. The assessment process that led to the 1996-97 changes established a precedent of "investigation before change" and provided enough data to correct some misconceptions about learning communities, including the writing links. Subsequently, however, assessment of learning communities and writing links has become more problematic, in part because our interest is now in "nontraditional" benefits and in part because our reliance on small projects left us without the large-scale, quantifiable assessment that could answer questions about the learning taking place.

Revisions to the Degree

In 1996, as an outgrowth of the studies, the General Education Committee forwarded to the college's Instruction Committee its recommendations for changes to the degree requirements, recommendations that were enacted that year. These recommendations included revision of the learning communities requirements for both the technical (ATA) and transfer (AA-UCT) degrees. The committee also developed an additional set of thirty-five recommendations, including support for the successful components of the program as well as further studies the college should undertake. Some of the recommendations included developing appropriate instruments for measuring student learning, identifying logistical issues, identifying perceived barriers to student and faculty participation, exploring creative possibilities for learning community structures, identifying "essential experiences" for collaborative courses and the means to ensure that they would be part of all program offerings, and "providing a mechanism and resources for continuing collegial conversation" about the nature and demands of the program.

Because of insufficient support for requiring learning communities for technical degree-seeking students, the ATA learning community requirement was dropped; instead, learning communities became optional, to be determined on a program-by-program basis. At the same time, the college expanded its definition of learning communities. Transfer students would still be required to take both of their college-level composition courses in English writing links and at least one learning community that combined courses from two different distribution areas. This pairing, referred to as "Option A," is identical to the original degree definition. However, students' choice of the second learning community could now include one of the so-called "Option B" learning communities that combine courses from departments in the same distribution area (for example literature and art) or developmental, technical, or skills courses (except composition). (Table 2, page 92, summarizes the degree changes.) Significant within these changes was the growing realization, supported by the results of the assessments,

that the learning community environment had advantages not considered earlier:

- learning communities provided a rich and stimulating environment for the renewal of faculty and for the sharing of pedagogy
- learning communities allowed students to create social and academic relationships with other students
- learning communities strengthened interpersonal skills and appealed to diverse learning styles
- learning communities enabled students to observe models of academic discourse in the classroom and then to explore for themselves diverse points of view in academic discussions

These results encouraged us to examine ways to take greater advantage of the potential of learning communities, for example, by expanding our definition to include more faculty members as well as courses that emphasized these elements. At the same time, we realized that we ought to begin assessing these elements.

The revisions adopted after this assessment also included two provisos in response to concerns raised during hearings held by governance committees. The first was that we continue to study student learning in learning communities. In other words, could we develop a way to understand and explain the gains we were seeing? The second was that we determine whether the requirement might present an unacceptable barrier to graduation; that is, since they represent larger credit packages, could students schedule up to four learning communities as well as other degree requirements and prerequisites for majors? This second concern—raised primarily by counseling faculty and administrators, and consistent with the increasing Washington state emphasis on efficiency and accountability measures in higher education (including time-to-degree, graduation rates)—determined much of the assessment during the next three years (1997-2000).

With the aid of instructors and, starting in 1998, the new director of Institutional Researcher, Maureen Pettitt, we concentrated on the demonstrable educational values of learning communities and on the possibility of learning communities being barriers for students trying to graduate. Skagit cooperated with several other colleges in the Puget Sound basin to analyze student intellectual growth in both solo and collaborative courses using the Measure of Intellectual Development (MID), a measure of students' cognitive complexity based on William Perry's scheme of student intellectual development in college.[9] We also analyzed the persistence rate of students who enrolled in learning communities or writing links their first quarter as well as data concerning students who transferred to regional universities. To determine whether the requirement created barriers, we examined waiver requests, the transcripts of students who had applied for graduation but not completed requirements, and the Whidbey Island campus measurement of student satisfaction. Finally, we also estimated the relative costs of providing the program of collaborative courses.

Under Maureen Pettitt's direction, the college compared GPAs of Skagit transfer students with those of other Washington state community college transfers and refined strategies for analyzing whether the program created

barriers. These included analysis of graduation rates and student transfer trends and the progress of degree-seeking students. We also gathered information from the Community College Student Experience Questionnaire (CCSEQ),[10] including twenty questions of our own, and from a mail survey of former of degree and certificate-seeking students. We followed up the survey with telephone interviews with students who had completed the Associate in Arts—University and College Transfer degree. All but the telephone interviews were completed in time to be included in report to college in spring of 2000.

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The results of these subsequent studies supported the idea that learning communities had increased retention and persistence and suggested that the learning community and English writing link requirements had not created barriers for students and were not financially burdensome to the college. Student comments about their advising needs, on the other hand, did suggest the critical role of advising in helping students understand the degree requirements and the nature of the collaborative course experience. Again, however, the studies were less clear with regard to the effects of learning communities and writing links on learning—we continued to be hampered by problems in methodology.

These assessments informed the General Education Committee discussions for the next two years and were part of the basis for the recommendation that the college further streamline its requirements for learning communities and writing links. Although the studies did not suggest that the requirements created barriers, "collegial conversations" between counseling and teaching faculty during 1999 and 2000 led to a greater understanding about the difficulties students faced trying to schedule four quarters of collaborative courses into approximately six quarters of college-level requirements. In addition, we found that both students and counseling and teaching faculty responded positively to the experience with what we are calling "college readiness" learning communities, fall-quarter collaborations that emphasize the transition to the college experience. These combinations include one or more developmental courses (such as pre-algebra or basic grammar) or reading, study skills or library science. As a result, the General Education Committee and, subsequently, the college's Instruction and Executive Committees, recommended that the learning community requirement be further modified so that as of summer quarter 2001, students would be required to complete only one "Option A" learning community, one composition link, and a third combination of the student's choosing. With these revisions, the college made a commitment to monitor the retention and success of students who take "college readiness" classes and continue this aspect of the program if they are shown to be effective.

One useful additional incentive for developing a more effective assessment of student learning came through the college accreditation process in 1999. The evaluators rated the assessment of student learning at the college as a whole as weak. As a consequence, the college created an Assessment Committee and undertook creation of student learning assessment projects in all departments during the coming years. In addition, the General Education Committee recommended a yearlong analysis of the original General Education outcomes to determine if they adequately reflect our current goals and if they are framed in a way that permits effective assessment.

Unfortunately, because we initially defined learning communities as a structural means to achieve our general education learning outcomes rather than as an outcome themselves, in the first round of proposals, no group proposed a study that might evaluate student learning in them. The General Education and Assessment Committees continue to seek ways to describe outcomes specific to learning communities and to wrestle with the problems of controlling for extraneous variables in studies. An assessment proposal for a two-year study of student learning in non-composition learning communities has been approved by the Assessment Committee for the 2001 through 2003 funding cycles. Simultaneously, we organized faculty seminars and focus groups on student learning for the 2002 winter and spring quarters, as a way to begin to refine our understanding and define more accurately the outcomes that might distinguish the learning that takes place in the learning community experience. Ironically, the fact that we *require* these collaborative classes creates many of our difficulties, for there are no "control groups" (not enrolled in learning communities and English writing links) with which we can make comparisons.

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Lessons Learned

In the last decade we have learned not only about our learning communities and about institutionalization of them, but about the nature of assessment. Our assessments taught us what students and faculty continued to value in their learning community experiences—and what needed to be changed. We learned that students place a high value on the opportunity to collaborate with each other and with faculty. We also learned that faculty members need to communicate well and consistently with students about the nature of the courses in which they enroll—not just learning communities—and that when students understand the goals of the program, they can better shift from traditional lecture-style classes to the challenges of interdisciplinary, activities-based learning. We learned that the experience of teaching collaboratively can lead to rich and rewarding professional development for faculty—even those who initially are uncertain of the value of such courses, and that both new and experienced learning community faculty members continue to describe their experiences as transformational. And we learned that the passion for teaching in learning communities has deepened and expanded with time, as evidenced by the increasing number of learning communities proposals submitted by virtually all full-time academic faculty as well as librarians, counselors, adjunct faculty, and administrators.

In a very immediate sense, we faced the paradox that both strengths and weaknesses lay in the ambitiousness of our program. Had we known the difficulties we would face with implementation and assessment of a college-wide requirement, we might never have had the nerve to embark on such ambitious degree changes. On the other hand, the sweep of the changes required that we develop mechanisms and networks that have improved how we support faculty development and student learning, and how we plan and deliver our annual schedule of courses. In fact, we learned in a very real and concrete way just how much ongoing support and training are necessary to sustain any effective program, not just for teaching but also for administration and support staff.

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Similarly, two of our hardest lessons were ones worth relearning. Our experiences with the ill-conceived learning community requirement for students in professional and technical programs taught us the importance of laying careful groundwork. We also learned anew that the perception that a learning community program is "exclusive" can threaten its integrity and viability. Conversely, we were reminded that sustained success is dependent on the inclusion of all faculty and of all student support faculty and staff—indeed, of everyone whose work contributes to the success of programs or to their failure.

Those of us with no prior assessment experience or expertise came to realize that good assessment forms the basis for effective improvement. With it, we can identify and respond to needs like faculty training or changes in the degree requirements and redirect resources and/or refocus our energies. Importantly, although it can be time-consuming—and at times tiresome—good assessment provides a crucial map of where we have been and what we have done. With significant turnover in faculty, staff, and administration, this "map" of our reasoning, successes, and needs has become an essential teaching tool for the whole college. Fortunately, we quickly recognized this need in terms of faculty development. The handouts of "teaching tips" that we designed in response to early degree assessment have evolved into faculty handbooks, now revised and available to all new faculty on the college's intranet. And our job descriptions and desired qualifications for advertised faculty positions in academic areas include statements about developing and teaching interdisciplinary collaborative courses. Our ability to work closely with counseling, registration, the public information office, and numerous other support areas and our continuous assessment of enrollments and student and faculty perceptions are fundamental to our ongoing efforts to improve our offerings, our teaching, and our communications with students.

Unfortunately, we rediscovered the importance of applying this understanding to all administrators and the board of trustees. Two years after the initial revisions were adopted, the college president, who had requested the general education reform to create greater curricular coherence, retired and was replaced by a president from out of state who had no prior knowledge of or experience with learning communities. Within a few years, most of the top-level administrative posts were filled by people new to the college, new to the state, and unfamiliar with learning communities and the rationale and historical development of our degree requirements and the learning community program. Their lack of familiarity with a program that many consider core to the college identity, coupled with their understandable concern about its size, created new pressures and new—or sometimes a return to old—assessment demands. While this is at times discouraging, it is also a timely reminder of the importance of revisiting assessment criteria and updating them. It has also led us to resume carrying out our responsibility to orient every member of the college community, including the board of trustees.

In some ways, the past twelve years have felt like a chase after an elusive target. The ongoing "trial and error" nature of assessment and the shifting goals have been frustrating and at times exhausting. Although we began with an

interest and commitment to assessment, we did not have a well-designed, broad-based assessment approach at the outset that could give us enough useful baseline data for later comparisons. We did not initially realize that we would need to distinguish between (and to identify and measure) both direct and indirect outcomes and that, perhaps, some of the indirect and/or unanticipated outcomes could be as important as those on which we based our initial recommendations for changes to the degree. As we learned more about our courses and our programs, we learned that instead of being "done," we needed to refine our questions and push for more complex answers. It also became apparent that not enough of us at the college understood—or understand—what constitutes "good" assessment, nor how complex it is.

Certainly, one of the most frustrating discoveries has been the highly charged, political nature of assessment. As coordinators, as we completed each round of studies, we were asked to produce new ones, always with very limited resources and time. At one level, we value the goal of verifying whether a program has merit and using the data to improve it; at another, the demands created the sense that the program was continuously under siege. Some faculty members and administrators opposed requiring learning communities from the outset. When assessments suggested that the program was cost-effective, that it did not create significant barriers to completion, and that it provided positive learning outcomes for students, some skeptics were satisfied; others were not. Several original opponents, joined by some new administrators, shifted the focus of their complaints, claiming that the learning community requirement might be driving students to drop out and/or to enroll at other community colleges in the region. At that time, enrollments were "softening" throughout the state, a new community college was created not far south, and a neighboring community college to the north was experiencing dramatic growth with a new campus center and new programs. Providing assessment "proof" to refute this claim was therefore difficult, if not impossible. When our institutional researcher reported that an analysis of available indicators did not suggest student "flight," the focus shifted again, this time to whether the learning community program delivers instruction cost-effectively.

Caught between competing assessment agendas—using the results to revise and strengthen the program and generating proof that it was successful at no additional cost—many of us began to believe we were assessing the learning communities against steeper accountability criteria than that demanded of other programs, including longstanding courses taught "stand-alone" and the newest classes in distance education. Significantly, when an analysis of barriers to degree completion ranked learning communities eighth behind seven other degree requirements, there were no calls for assessment of those first seven barriers. Similarly, despite data that demonstrates a higher attrition rate for Distance Education courses and despite little assessment to support the kind or extent of student learning in them, the college continues to redistribute significant resources to expand those offerings.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of our experience has been the difficulty we have experienced in creating effective and accessible assessment tools that

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will provide substantive data about the nature and extent of student learning. But this is a challenge we face in assessing the nature and extent of student learning in all our programs—not just learning communities. In the assessment "chase," our own target has moved as we have sought a more sophisticated understanding of what we mean by learning outcomes in learning communities and how those might differ from other instructional settings. The college is still developing how it will assess learning outcomes in all disciplines, programs, and areas. As we increase our commitment to assessment of all learning and more of us begin to shift toward an understanding of assessment as iterative inquiry, we may find that the extensive experience in learning communities assessment will prove useful.

In the final analysis, one important result of our chase is that, while we have not learned all that we had hoped about learning communities, we have learned a great deal. Thanks to our early and extensive assessments of learning communities as part of our degree requirements, we were able to transform an ambitious but struggling program into a successful, well-integrated one. Thanks to those and subsequent assessments, we may well know more about our learning community courses—and more about assessing them—than about any other instructional program at the college. We do know that both students and faculty value these experiences. We know that students who enroll in learning communities are retained in those quarters and persist to subsequent quarters. We know that faculty members who teach in learning communities—which at present includes almost all full-time and many adjunct academic faculty—believe that these courses challenge students and promote significant learning in several domains. We also know that faculty members are proud of their own learning communities and of the program at the college. We know that they embrace the challenge of teaching in learning communities and believe that the experience of teaching them has strengthened both the quality of teaching in their other classes and the depth of collegiality at the college. Finally, we know that we are not done. To find the answers we do not yet have and to understand the impact of any of course offerings—including learning communities—on student learning, we must continue to deepen our own learning.

APPENDIX A: Summary of Reports Done in 1995-1996

1. A Survey of Faculty Perceptions of General Education Elements
2. Results of Campus-Wide Small Group Institutional Diagnosis (SGID) about General Education Program (Mount Vernon): Analysis of feedback from faculty, staff, and administrators using adaptation of Small Group Instructional Diagnosis, a feedback technique for classroom assessment
3. Learning Communities and Writing Links at Whidbey: Student SGID's and Faculty Exit Interviews
4. Learning Communities at Mount Vernon: Student SGID's and Faculty Exit Interviews
5. Analysis of Student Comments from SGID's at Whidbey Campus
6. An Analysis of Persistence and GPA of Students in Learning Communities
7. Comparison of Student Responses to Experiences in Learning Community and Stand-Alone Classes
8. Results of ATA Student Learning Community Survey
9. Writing Links at Mount Vernon: Student SGID's, Faculty Exit Interviews, and Student Responses to Writing Prompts
10. Persistence, Retention, and Performance of Students in Writing Links
11. Compliance of Skills-Designated Classes with General Education Requirements (Mount Vernon)
12. Compliance of Department Course Outlines with General Education Cultural Pluralism Requirements
13. Profile of Learning into Action Program
14. Results of Survey of Students in Distance Education Courses
15. Student Knowledge of General Education Requirements
16. Student Satisfaction with Learning Community and Writing Link Experiences (Whidbey Campus)
17. General Education Strategies at Skagit Valley College: An Outsider's View
18. Enrollment Analysis for General Education
19. Waiver Requests: Analysis of numbers and kinds of requests for degree waivers

APPENDIX B: Excerpts from Summary of Third Year Assessment of Learning Communities and Links

The assessments summarized in this report were conducted during 1995-96 to review the effectiveness of the general education reforms instituted in 1993.

These studies suggest broad-based support by faculty, staff, and students for some aspects of the program.

- Most studies indicated that staff, faculty, and students believe that the General Education program responded to perceived weaknesses of the prior program, specifically the needs for curricular cohesion, reinforcement of basic skills, and increased flexibility in teaching and learning styles. Studies of learning communities and writing links suggested some success in terms of integration. The most successful components of the program appeared to be the cross-curricular emphasis on writing and interpersonal as well as group process skills, i.e., the ability to work with others in group settings.
- Studies noted that the revisions reinforce other aspects of the General Education program, particularly critical thinking skills. Faculty who teach in collaborative courses (learning communities and writing links) perceived an increased emphasis on critical thinking.
- In terms of faculty support for the success of specific elements, English 102 writing links rated the highest, followed by skills-designated classes, English 101 writing links, and then learning communities.

Not all elements were perceived as successful, possibly reflecting differences in implementation strategies as well as gaps in institutional focus.

- While perceptions of numerous student outcomes were generally positive, some results seemed contradictory. For instance, while some faculty believed learning communities and links increased the emphasis on critical thinking, the faculty survey suggests that only 31 percent believe this aspect of the program was successful.

No current studies provided sufficient data to substantiate mean improvement in the quality and nature of student learning.

- The assessments under review focused primarily on student, staff, and faculty perceptions; they included limited data on the perceptions of students and faculty from some units. Comparisons of GPAs for students in writing links and learning communities were inconclusive; faculty largely concluded that team-planning and team-teaching tends to raise the bar on student expectations.
- No studies provided sufficient data to substantiate problems with cost of and/or access to elements of the program.
- Students and staff feared that students in some programs may encounter barriers to timely completion of degrees, either in terms of scheduling or credit load. The data was inconclusive.

The quality of instruction for various elements of the degree varied sharply depending on how and where courses are offered.

- Perceptions of effectiveness of individual elements varied between campuses, between those who had experience with a particular pedagogy and those who did not, and between different units (i.e., day academic and continuing education). Support was significantly higher among full-time than among part-time faculty.

Problems with implementation may have impaired the effectiveness of the program.

- Many groups expressed concern with the difficulty of scheduling times and space for classes, particularly for programs with specific prerequisites.
- The requirements appeared to be more easily accessed by day academic students than by vocational students and those dependent on Continuing Education, Distance Education, and satellite sites.
- No studies provided sufficient specific data about scheduling difficulties.

The success of various elements appeared to be uneven, possibly reflecting the need for analysis of work loads and delivery systems as well as improved training.

- While several studies cite the positive values of increased faculty interaction and opportunities for mentoring, staff were equally concerned with workload issues.
- In addition to concerns for problems of collaboration in some learning communities and writing links (taught by both full- and part-time staff), faculty and staff cited problems with inadequate training and the need for time for planning and collaboration.
- Significant differences in the responses of part- and-full time faculty to the program may have reflected the strain on part-time faculty who may not have access to training or receive sufficient support for collaboration with colleagues in links.
- The changes have increased the advising load and intensity for counselors and academic advisors.

Students may not fully understand the purpose and expectations of the general education program and definitions of the different elements of the degree.

- Several studies noted concern with student readiness: whether students are well served by taking skills designates before taking the fundamental skills course and whether they are sufficiently prepared for the expectations of active learning and experiential education.
- Student comments in SGIDs (Small Group Instructional Diagnosis classroom feedback sessions) and surveys suggested that both Associate in Arts-University and College Transfer (AA-UCT) and Associate in Technical Arts (ATA) degrees students were still confused about differences between learning communities and writing links.
- Comments on the ATA access survey suggested that technical students may not understand that the accreditation policies, which mandate general education for technical students, require that they take course(s) outside their specific program.

TABLE 1: Learning Community Definitions at Skagit Valley College

Composition Learning Communities (English Writing Links)	Non-composition Learning Communities
English Writing Links are courses that combine a specific discipline such as history or art with one of the college-level writing classes required for students who plan to transfer to a four year college or university.	**Learning Communities** are courses that combine study in two or more non-composition disciplines. For the purposes of the degree requirements, Skagit offers two kinds of learning communities: Option A and Option B.
Most are offered as required links, that is, students must enroll in both courses. Faculty co-design assignments and share evaluation. For example, in "Stating the Matter" (chemistry & composition), faculty designed all four writing assignments; two of these were read by both instructors and counted toward both course grades.	Option A learning communities combine courses from two of the three different distribution areas as defined by university transfer requirements. Examples include courses like "Antigone to Antimatter" (dramatic literature & physics) and "Van Gogh's Ear" (abnormal psychology and art).
In some writing links, students who enroll in the composition course select one "linking" course from several options. For instance, "Fleshing Out the Bones," includes optional links for nursing or biology students and "Writing About Social Sciences" links a research paper course to sociology or developmental psychology. In these courses, faculty are expected to confer with each other about the appropriateness of the link. They are also encouraged to confer about the effectiveness of the writing assignments in supporting the learning taking place in both courses and to decide if papers will count toward the grade in both courses.	Option B learning communities consist of any other kind of pairing of two courses, *except* college-level composition and courses from the same discipline, i.e., history with history. These can include: • Courses from the same distribution area, i.e., two arts courses, like "Rhapsody in Blue" (modern art & 20th-century music); • Skills courses, i.e., "Under the Weather" (meteorology & library science) or "Walk the Talk" (interpersonal speech, health and wellness, and PE); • Developmental courses, i.e., "Celebrate Yourself" (basic English, reading and study skills); or • Courses from technical programs , i.e., "Little Red Schoolhouse" (early childhood education and U.S. history).

TABLE 2: Degree Requirement Changes for Learning Communities

Year	Associate in Arts-University and College Transfer (AA-UCT)	Associate in Technical Arts (ATA)
1993	Students are required to take two college-level composition courses as English Writing Links. In addition, they must take at least one course in each of three distribution areas (sciences, social sciences and the arts) in a Learning Community. This requirement can be met with a single, three-course combination or two pairs.	Students are required to take at least one learning community to satisfy five credits required in "general education" or related learning.
1997	Students are still required to take two required college-level composition courses as English Writing Links. They must still take one Learning Community that combines courses from at least two distribution areas (sciences, social sciences and the arts)—the so-called "Option A" type. They may elect to take their second learning community combination as an Option A or the newly permitted Option B. (See Table 1.) Enrolling in a Learning Community with a Writing Link attached would satisfy two of the three requirements. Enrolling in an Option A Learning Community that includes a skills course, for instance, reading or library science, would satisfy two of the three requirements. The number of credits is irrelevant.	The learning community requirement is dropped. Individual programs may require or permit that the five credits required in "general education" or related learning be taken in a learning community.
2001	Students are required to take three learning community combinations. These include at least one college-level composition course in a Writing Link and one Option A learning community. For the third combination, students may choose a second English Writing Link, a second Option A Learning Community, or an Option B Learning Community. Enrolling in Learning Community with a Writing Link attached would satisfy two of the three requirements. Enrolling in an Option A Learning Community that includes a skills course, for instance, reading or library science, would satisfy two of the three requirements. The number of credits is irrelevant.	

Sample Learning Communities at Skagit Valley College

Type	Typical Examples
Developmental	"Celebrate Yourself: Basic English, Reading, and Study Skills" "In Other Words/En Otros Terminos: Spanish and Basic English" "The Mathematical Solution to Wellness: Basic Math & Health and Wellness" "Reading Writing Connection: Basic English and Reading" "Righting Our Destinies: English & Career Exploration" "What's the Problem?: Basic Math and English"
LCs for Professional/ Technical Students	"The Buck top Here: Business Administration amd Literature" "Myths & Meanings of the World of Children: Early Childhood Education and Art" "On the Job/On the Screen: Social History of Work and Film" "Speaking About Law . . .: Business Law & Public Speaking"
Non-composition Learning Communities	"Antigone to Antimatter: Dramatic Literature & Physics" "Dirty Books: Literature & Library Science" "Feats of Clay: Earth Science & Ceramics" "La Diversidad de Nuestra Gente: Spanish & Ethnic Studies" "Living in the Renaissance: Western Civilization & Art History" "Living Systems: Biology & Sociology" "Rhapsody in Blue: Modern Art and 20th Century Music" "RolePlay: Drama, Gender & Interpersonal Speech" "The Seeing Self: Drawing & Interpersonal Speech" "SEX.comm: Human Sexuality & Mass Communications" "Walk the Talk: Interpersonal Speech, Health and Wellness, and PE" "You Are Who You Eat: Anthropology and Nutrition"
Composition Learning Communities	"Daily Planet: Astronomy and Composition" "El Podor y Color del Alma: Introduction to Art and Composition" "Lies and Damn Lies: Statistics and Composition" "Textiles, Texture & Text: Art Design and Composition" "The Write Byte: Computer Science and Composition" "Title Waves: Environmental Geology and Composition"

Endnotes

1. Washington state's Higher Education Coordinating Board 1989 Master Plan for Higher Education emphasized that outcomes assessment would be most effective if developed within institutions by faculty and administrators with the explicit goal of making improvements. Based on this, the state legislature allocated funding for the six baccalaureate institutions and the community college system office to design and conduct assessment of student learning on the basis of local needs, priorities, and cultures. In 1990, funding was extended to the state's community colleges and in 1993 to technical colleges. The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) provides coordination and leadership for the assessment initiative, an annual conference, a monthly online assessment newsletter, and a network of campus assessment contacts. Information about the assessment efforts is available at www.sbctc.ctc.edu.

2. The college organized fourteen specific learning outcomes into three areas (skills, knowledge, and application) and further subdivided each of those into goals or principles, each with specific learning outcomes. For instance, skills included three goals: communication (both oral and written), quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking (which included both reasoning and research skills). We prefaced the proposed outcomes with four "guiding principles" for a curriculum that "values lifelong learning, demands respect for diversity of peoples and points of view, emphasizes that all modes of inquiry are related, and encourages interdependence of all knowledge to life experience." Each of the three areas was similarly prefaced. The preface for skills outcomes stated our belief in the need for practice to achieve higher levels of competence. The preface for understanding modes of inquiry (studies in the natural world and environment, the development and features of culture, and the arts) stated that "skills are best developed when integrated with the acquisition of knowledge in specific subject matter." The preface to the third and final area, "putting knowledge into action," stated that the college "believes that general education is more complete if students integrate acquired skills and knowledge with action."

3. Because composition and non-composition learning communities are structured and compensated differently at Skagit, the term "Learning Community" used in degree requirements refers to a combination of two or more classes that does NOT include composition. Courses combining college-level composition are referred to as "English Writing Links."

4. The ASSET test, designed and administered by American College Testing (ACT), is the primary instrument used to place students in the appropriate beginning courses in composition, reading, and math. In addition to requiring learning communities and English writing links, the new program required curriculum-wide infusion of critical thinking skills, cultural pluralism, and an emphasis on basic skills that expanded the concept of writing-across-the-curriculum to speech, math, and reading.

5. In addition to requiring learning communities and English writing links, the new program required curriculum-wide infusion of critical thinking skills, cultural pluralism, and an emphasis on basic skills that expanded the concept of writing-across-the-curriculum to speech, math, and reading.

6. Only one baseline assessment of non-composition learning communities was instituted. Because the Board of Trustees mandated that the new requirements not impede students from achieving their educational goals in a timely manner, the Whidbey Island campus began administering a short "Student Satisfaction Survey" that asked students to rate their perception of the value of the learning community combination they were completing. We began administering the surveys *before* we began requiring learning communities and links as a way to gauge whether students felt they could still get the classes they needed. Significantly, due to careful planning and monitoring of offerings, "Satisfaction" measured in this survey increased dramatically (and by a statistically significant level) after the new requirements were put into effect, rising from an average of about 46 percent in pre-learning community days, to an average of 68 percent in recent years.

7. Students operate under the degree requirements in effect during the year they begin their studies. Typically, students take about three years to complete their associate degree. Thus, the college provided learning communities and links sufficient for about one-third of the students during the first year and for two-thirds during the second year. As late as the fourth year of the program (1997) some students were still operating under the old, pre-learning-community requirements.

8. Information about results elsewhere provided by Barbara Leigh Smith in a personal communication, October 12, 2001.

9. For further information about the Measure of Intellectual Development instrument, contact William S. Moore, Center for the Study of Intellectual Development, 1505 Farwell Ct. NW, Olympia, WA 98502, 360-786-5094 (voice) 503-212-8082 (fax).

10. The Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ) is a nationally-normed survey (Friedlander, Pace, and Lehman 1990). Derived from the four-year College Student Experiences Questionnaire (Pace 1984), the questionnaire includes items to collect data on student characteristics, their educational goals, how extensively and productively they use the facilities and opportunities the college provides, the progress they think they have made toward important goals, and satisfaction with support services. The concept of "quality of effort" is central to the questionnaire. In other words, what students learn in college will depend to a considerable degree on the quality of effort they invest in the college experience. This is measured by how much they do with respect to capitalizing on what college offers—courses, library, writing, arts, science, faculty contact, student acquaintances, etc.

References

Friedlander, J., C. R. Pace, and P. W. Lehman. 1990. *The Community College Student Experience Questionnaire.* Los Angeles, CA: Center for the Study of Student Evaluation, University of California, Los Angeles.

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