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Guest Editors' Note

Special Double Issue:
Washington Center's National Project
on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities

This special edition of the *Journal of Learning Communities Research* introduces readers to the work undertaken by campus teams involved in Washington Center's National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities (September 2006 to June 2008). We appreciate the willingness of the journal co-editors, Barbara Jackson and Keisha Hoerner, and the managing editor, David Thompson, to let us serve as guest editors. We can think of no better vehicle than this journal to share insights from this project with learning community practitioners across the country.

We note that this journal issue is being readied for the printers as the latest report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities' Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) has just become available. In *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, George Kuh examines data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and one of the ten high-impact practices named is learning communities. As Kuh points out, while all students benefit from educational practices that encourage engagement and support deep learning, students historically underserved in higher education benefit even more from learning communities than their advantaged peers. This finding, placed alongside an earlier finding highlighted in the 2007 NSSE report, *Experiences That Matter: Enhancing Student Learning and Success*, whereby intentionally-designed integrative assignments lead to greater student engagement and deeper understanding within learning communities, underscores the critical importance of the work undertaken by campus teams involved in the national project.

This special issue features eight articles that highlight what campus teams discovered as they worked with the two core tools central to the national project practice: Veronica Boix-Mansilla and colleagues' Collaborative Assessment Protocol and Washington's Center's heuristic,

Designing Integrative and Purposeful Assignments. In the first article, *Assessing Integrative Learning: Insights from Washington Center's National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities*, we describe the use of these tools in the context of the project's purpose, core assumptions, essential practices, and key findings.

In the second article, *Productive Shifts: Faculty Growth through Collaborative Assessment of Student Interdisciplinary Work*, Veronica Boix-Mansilla details the pivotal shifts between "from" and "to" in faculty thinking that occurred throughout the project.

In the third article, *Juggling and the Art of the Integrative Assignment*, Lynn Dunlap and Larry Sult from Skagit Valley College, who have taught fully-coordinated learning community pairs since 1987 (and often together), examine the impressive consequences for student learning when the design of integrative assignments is intentionally grounded in specific disciplines.

In the fourth article, *Assessing Student Work to Support Curriculum Development: An Engineering Case Study*, Kevin Saunders and colleagues from Iowa State University report on the process and results of reviewing student work from four departmental courses in the agricultural engineering curriculum where the expectations for today's engineering graduates include integrating knowledge across disciplines, applying knowledge to real-world situations, and demonstrating skills in creativity, teamwork, communication, and collaboration.

In the fifth article, *Beyond "Parallel Play": Creating a Realistic Model of Integrative Learning with Community College Freshmen*, Evelyn Burg, Marisa Klages, and Patricia Sokolski from LaGuardia Community College investigate what interdisciplinary integration might actually look like at the early stages of a community college career when students are in developmental courses.

In the sixth article, *Exploring Voice as Integration: A Direction for Assessing Student Work in Learning Communities with Composition*, Janine Graziano-King and Gabrielle Kahn from Kingsborough Community College look at the role of voice in students' writing as evidence of integration within a learning-community which links a composition course to a general education course.

In the seventh article, *Assessing Interdisciplinary Learning in Theme-Based, One-Semester Communities*, Keisha Hoerner and colleagues report on the insights gained from examining work in theme-based learning communities to determine whether content from one discipline was evident in student work produced in another discipline.

In the final article, *Templates and Rubrics: Connecting Outcomes*,

Assignments and Assessment in Interdisciplinary Learning Communities, Maureen Pettitt and David Muga from Skagit Valley College—where learning communities have been a requirement for the transfer degree since 1993—share results when an institutional researcher and a faculty member collaborate to develop a comprehensive assessment approach where Skagit’s emphasis on integrative learning and general education “learning values” can be documented in a transparent way so that faculty and students can more easily recognize connections between disciplinary and interdisciplinary outcomes, assignments, and assessment criteria.

We expect that other issues of this journal will include articles written by faculty involved in the national project. In our view, this issue marks a turning point in learning community practitioners’ scholarship because assessing student work has become the starting-point for determining teaching and program effectiveness.

We appreciate that the colleagues’ whose work is highlighted in these pages are sharing “works-in-progress.” We want to thank them for their generosity, and they and the other participants in the national project for their pioneering efforts. For readers who measure their effectiveness as teachers in relation to student learning, we invite you to work with the core tools used in the national project—both the *Collaborative Assessment Protocol* and *Designing Integrative and Purposeful Assignments* are posted on the Washington Center website (www.evergreen.edu/washcenter) along with campus project reports and examples of integrative assignments.

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