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Do Learning Communities  
Really “Work?”

# Do Learning Communities Really “Work?”

In the early 1990s, as news of the curricular learning community approach began to spread in North American higher education, a natural question to ask was, “But do these strategies for building cohorts in linked classes really work? Where is the evidence that they live up to their intentions?” The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College, a resource for learning community development and practice in Washington state, began to receive inquiries about a definitive study that would prove that learning communities lived up to their intentions.

From our abundant experience working with faculty and staff members teaching in learning communities, we knew that they “felt in their bones” that there was great power in these approaches. The world of learning community practice was rich in testimonials about the value of creating academic programs where students could build both social and intellectual connections. Nonetheless, although a variety of learning community programs have dotted the higher education landscape for more than eighty years, early learning community pioneers generally devoted their energy to launching and sustaining these initiatives rather than to evaluating their outcomes.

This situation began to change about a decade ago. With support from the federally funded National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment at Pennsylvania State University, student-retention scholar Vincent Tinto and his doctoral students Anne Goodsell Love and Patricia Russo at Syracuse University undertook the first comprehensive research study of learning community process and impact (Tinto et al. 1994). This research, carried out at three institutions with substantially different learning community programs, made an important contribution both to learning community theory and practice by summarizing the positive effects of learning communities on students’ retention and academic achievement. More important though, based on the extensive qualitative investigations of Tinto and his students, this study also elaborated a theory about student engagement in college—that students’ social lives and academic lives were intertwined and that effective first-year programs intentionally linked them.

At the same time, the field of higher education assessment was expanding rapidly as higher education coordinating boards, legislators, and accrediting associations were all asking colleges and universities to more clearly define and document measurable progress toward their educational goals. The expansion of learning community programs coincided with growing attention in higher education to assessment and accountability. More and more campuses began to realize that they could not invest in learning community program development without investing in assessment as well. Also at this time, a growing number of masters’ and doctoral students chose to do their thesis research on learning community programs.

As the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education became more widely known for its learning community expertise, more and more learning community leaders began to share their work, sending the center assessment reports, conference papers, journal articles, and dissertations. There was now beginning to be a body of literature about learning

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community impact. In the late 1990s, Jerri Lindblad, a Visiting Fellow at the Washington Center, conducted a first review of the array of learning community reports and studies collected there (Lindblad 2000). She reported that most assessment studies—half of which represented team-taught coordinated studies programs—indicated that learning community students complete courses and persist in college at higher rates than students not in these programs; that many students perform academically as well or better than non-learning community students; and that both students and teachers involved in these programs generally report that these experiences are positive, and in some cases, highly rewarding.

Realizing that new information on learning community impact was continuing to emerge, and still receiving inquiries about a definitive study on learning community effectiveness, leaders of the National Learning Communities Project decided to undertake a more systematic and comprehensive review of learning community research and impact, and learning community program descriptions in assessment studies and reports. Four of us, Kathe Taylor, William S. Moore, Jean MacGregor, and Jerri Lindblad, have collaboratively gathered this information, analyzing it and drawing conclusions about the efficacy of learning communities and needs for future learning community assessment. This monograph reports on our work.

### **Obtaining Research Studies and Assessment Reports**

The goal of our report was to synthesize what we could learn from learning community research and assessment studies available through mid-2003. We began by reviewing the existing reports and dissertations in the files in the Washington Center. We obtained permission from a learning community leader or contact at the institution to include each report in our study, and actively sought more recent or more comprehensive reports. Next, using the Learning Communities Directory on the “Learning Commons” website (<http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu>) of the National Learning Communities Project and participant rosters of recent learning community conferences, we contacted learning community leaders around the country to request assessment studies. We also posted general requests on several national listservs: the Learning Communities Listserv (LEARNCOM), the Collaborative Learning Listserv (COLLAB), and the Professional and Organizational Development Listserv (POD). In these requests, we were candid about hoping to acquire not only the assessment reports that reported positive results, but also assessments reporting neutral, negative, or puzzling outcomes as well. Finally, we searched Dissertation Abstracts for additional theses on learning community programs. Despite our attempts to be thorough, we may not have unearthed the extent of research reports and assessment studies on learning communities.

When we discovered that some institutions actually had many assessment studies, carried out iteratively over a number of years, we requested from those assessment-rich institutions three of their most comprehensive studies about each learning community initiative. We also learned that a few institutions were engaged in intensive formative assessment projects on their learning

communities, and were permitted to study them with the condition that their written reports would remain confidential and internal to the institution. More than thirty institutions reported they had assessment work under way, but were not yet ready to share a formal report.

The institutional assessment reports and research studies came in many forms. They included formal institutional assessment reports intended for an internal audience at the college or university; external reports to grantors; journal articles and conference papers that recounted assessment strategies and results; and book chapters about learning community assessment. We hope that this synthesis of those reports will provide learning community leaders and assessors with a snapshot of current learning community impact and assessment strategies.

### Strategy for Analysis

Learning community programs are not sufficiently parallel to allow for a formal, statistical meta-analysis. Learning community programs are highly variable in curricular design and audience, variable in amount of coursework and credit (from four- and five-credit offerings all the way to two entire years' worth of integrated work), variable in their pedagogical practices, variable in the number of students they serve, and variable in the degrees to which co-curricular and residence-life components are connected to learning community coursework.

Instead, for this first comprehensive look at learning community research and assessment, we asked the following questions of each research study or assessment report:

- What were the intentions and audience of the learning community initiative?
- What kind of learning community program was put in place and who served on the learning community teaching teams?
- What was the purpose of the research study or assessment?
- What actual outcomes were examined?
- From whom were the data collected? (students, faculty, staff, administrators?)
- What conclusions can we draw about learning community impact?
- What was the depth and quality of the institutional assessment reports? What was included and what was missing?

### Organization of this Report

This introductory section of the report provides background about our purpose and approach. In Chapter II, we give a brief overview of the single-institution and multiple-institution research studies. A matrix of the 32 single-institution research studies (found in Appendix A) summarizes at a glance the distinct characteristics of each study. Descriptions of the single- and multiple-institution studies can be found in the annotated bibliographies included in Appendices B and C.

In Chapter III, we explain our process for reviewing the single-institution assessment reports, and summarize some general trends. A comprehensive matrix listing all 119 studies, included in Appendix D, gives a quick snapshot of

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outcomes and methodologies. Chapter IV highlights 17 assessment reports we deemed to be “notable” for the quality of the assessment study and the manner in which it was reported. Finally, Chapter V offers parting thoughts about what we have learned and recommendations for future work. Appendix E contains a list of the commercially available instruments cited in the single-institution assessment reports. Appendix F includes a complete bibliography of all the studies and reports.