II

Research Studies

Research Studies

Although this monograph is primarily a review of *assessment* work in learning communities, we looked also at both single-institution and multiple-institution *research* studies. While the distinction is not consistently clear cut, assessment studies generally focus on a narrower frame, looking to provide feedback on and improve a specific student, class, program, or institution. Research, on the other hand, is directed more broadly toward addressing larger and potentially more generalizable questions, and usually does not make recommendations for improving the educational intervention or endeavor. One drawback to such a broad approach is that it risks losing the tight focus that allows one to draw conclusions that might lead to actions. Despite this limitation, these research studies, taken collectively, provide a complementary and reasonably consistent perspective on learning communities in conjunction with the range of other studies we reviewed.

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Dissertations, Theses, and Single-Institution Research Studies

We reviewed 32 formal, research studies conducted in the United States, including 28 doctoral dissertations, one master's thesis, one undergraduate senior thesis, and two institutional studies. Each study is listed in a matrix (Appendix A) and described in an annotated bibliography (Appendix B). The following descriptive statistics give a quick snapshot of the methodology and foci of the studies:

- **Thirteen took an exclusively qualitative approach, using standard qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, observations, and document review to collect data** (Benjamin, 2003; Brown, 2003; Burright, 2002; Goodsell, 1993; Oertel, 2001; Roberts, 1998; Russo, 1995; Rye, 1997; Tennant, 2003; Tommerup, 1993; Trow, 1998; White, 1992; Young, 2003).
- **Twelve studied learning communities at community colleges** (Belton, 1998; Brown, 2003; Minkler, 2000; Moore, 2000; Ott, 1993; Roberts, 1998; Russo, 1995; Rye, 1997; Tennant, 2003; Tollefson, 1990; Weber, 2000; White, 1992); **19 studied those at baccalaureate (largely, research) colleges or universities** (Barnard, 2001; Benjamin, 2003; Burright, 2002; Carlson, 2002; Chonko, 1999; Earnest, 2002; Goodsell, 1993; Henscheid, 1996; Horn, 2000; Peterka, 1998; Ramirez, 2002; Sullivan, 1991; Tommerup, 1993; Trow, 1998; Walker, 2001; Walker-Guyer, 1999; Woods, 1999; Young, 2003; Zunkel, 2002); **one included participants from both community college and baccalaureate institutions** (Oertel, 2001).
- **All but seven** (Brown; 2003; Oertel, 2001; Rye, 1997; Tollefson, 1990; Tommerup, 1993; Trow, 1998; Young, 2003) studied learning communities that **primarily** or exclusively involved freshmen or entering students.
- **Four focused exclusively on student perspectives experienced in interdisciplinary, team-taught coordinated studies learning communities** (Belton, 1998; Russo, 1995; Tennant, 2003; Trow, 1998).
- **Six concentrated on living/learning communities** (Benjamin, 2003; Burright, 2002; Earnest, 2002; Henscheid, 1996; Roberts, 1998; Woods, 1999).

- **Five focused exclusively on faculty or practitioner perspectives** (Brown, 2003; Oertel, 2001; Rye, 1997; Tollefson, 1990; Young, 2003).
- **Three looked at learning communities for underprepared students** (Horn, 2000; Moore, 2000; Weber, 2000).
- **Three studied students' cognitive or personal development** (Barnard, 2001; Carlson, 2001; Ott, 1993).
- **One focused primarily on the experience of peer mentors** (Benjamin, 2003).

Patterns in the Dissertations, Theses, and Single-Institution Research Studies

Because these studies were so variable in terms of their scope, the types of learning community programs examined, and the research methodology, we cannot generalize about the findings in *all* of the studies, or make global judgments regarding one type of learning community program's superiority over another. While some of the studies gave the reader a thorough context in which to understand the characteristics of a particular learning community at a specific institution, others provided only a cursory description. Most left the reader wanting to know more about the structure and practices that defined the learning community program.

In all the studies, the learning communities consisted of two or more classes in which cohort groups were enrolled, or they linked residence life with academic experiences. Nevertheless, with only a few exceptions, very little description was provided about the nature of curricular connections made among the classes, teaching approaches, strategies for fostering community, or of student evaluation. Although many studies acknowledged the newness of a learning community program, few studies described the planning or support for the faculty or staff who taught in these programs, or described the nature or degree of faculty (or faculty-staff) collaboration to deliver them. Instead, the focus was primarily on outcomes for students: their academic achievement, course completion and retention, and perceptions of their learning community experience. Even a statistic as seemingly straightforward as retention was challenging to interpret. Eight studies (Chonko 1999; Earnest 2002; Minkler 2000; Moore 2000; Ott 1993; Walker 2001; Walker-Guyer 1999; Zunkel 2002) analyzed the impact of learning communities upon student persistence against a comparison group of students. But the studies looked at retention over different lengths of time, within different learning community structures, and against different types of learning experiences, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

The promise of the learning community approach for increasing student engagement, retention, and academic success were recurring themes. Yet the results were not uniformly positive. Some studies, especially several that examined the very first offerings of learning community programs, indicated that certain learning community programs did not fully realize their intentions, and others revealed that there were positive and negative reactions to learning communities on the part of students and their teachers.

One consistent pattern emerged in four dissertations that explored the experience of community college faculty members who had elected to engage in learning community teaching. These faculty members valued this work highly.

They reported that teaching collaboratively in learning communities was a major source of professional development and renewal through crossing boundaries and reframing their understandings of their disciplines, enlarging or deepening their teaching repertoires, and building shared understanding of teaching diverse students (Brown 2003; Minkler 2000; Rye 1997; Tollefson 1990).

As noted above, most studies used multiple methods to gather information about student retention and academic achievement and about students' perceptions of their experience through surveys, focus groups or interviews, or some combination of these. Only a small number of studies looked at student intellectual development. While many studies examined student achievement as measured by grades, very few examined learning gains through student performance on standardized tests or demonstrations of knowledge and abilities through locally designed assignments. Only one study undertook a retrospective look at students' meaning-making about their learning community experience. Only one explored the involvement of peer mentors, a rapidly growing strategy for strengthening learning community teaching teams. While a few studies mentioned issues related to the implementation of the learning community initiative at the college or university, no study focused exclusively on the institutional processes or leadership work associated with launching and sustaining these innovations.

Notable Dissertations and Single-Institution Research Studies

A brief overview of each study is provided in the annotated bibliography in Appendix A. Four studies, however, merit highlighting, for their unusual research approaches and their informative findings. (The numbers in parentheses refer to the page number in the study.)

Identifying the Essential Characteristics of Curricular Learning Communities in Higher Education: A Delphi Study

Barbara Oertel (2001) used a four-round *Delphi Study* to identify the essential characteristics of curricular learning communities. Seventeen experienced learning community practitioners and/or researchers from throughout the United States participated in the study. This group generated an initial list of 79 characteristics of learning communities, and through the Delphi process, they pared them down to five:

1. The curriculum is integrated and interdisciplinary, cutting across departmental lines and divisions.
2. There is a high level of faculty collaboration and participation in all facets of the learning community program.
3. Learning is collaborative and active.
4. There is ongoing assessment and communication about student learning outcomes and program results.
5. The learning community program fits within its institution's mission, structures, processes, culture, and climate.

This level of agreement among deeply knowledgeable practitioners sets a credible foundation for discussion about learning community structure and design.

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**Student Conceptions of a Community College
Team-Taught Learning Community**

Margaret Tennant (2003) used a *phenomenographic* approach to investigate the qualitatively different ways that students in a team-taught learning community program understood their experience. Developed in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Australia, phenomenography attempts to understand the ways people experience or understand a phenomenon in order to understand the *essence* of their experiences, and then to create a meaningful structural model applicable

**Table 1
Students' Perceptions of a Team Taught-Learning Community (TTLC) Experience**

Categories Components	1. Alternative Structure-Negative *"Annoying"*	2. Alternative Structure-Positive *"Interesting"*	3. Social Learning *"Fun & Friends"*	4. Community *"Bonding"*	5. Expanded Learning *"Learning"*
Summary	Does not like basic TTLC components	Structure and setting provide convenient and interesting alternative to traditional classes	Class is about meeting other students and making friends	Encouraged intimacy allows a safe place to share and gain personal voice	Everything comes together to promote new and deep learning
TTLC Component: **Structure & Setting**	**Prefers a traditional structure and format**	**TTLC built-in components make class less boring and more expedient**	Vehicles for making friends	Promote deep sharing and support	Springboards for this integration of all TTLC components
TTLC Component: **Peer Interaction**	Dislikes group work and finds other students annoying	Interaction makes class less boring	**Enthusiasm for friends underlie all TTLC activities**	Provide personal support and sharing of personal life and perspectives	Part of the class system and connections; they teach each other and create new learning
TTLC Component: **Instructor Involvement**	Sees instructors as separate from the students; prefers traditional role	Team teaching makes class less boring	Seen as personable and caring; also friends	**Instrumental because they encourage student voice**	Part of the class system and connections, so integral to the learning process
TTLC Component: **Curricular Connections**	Little or no awareness	Connections made topics less boring	Not emphasized, but can promote group activities that involve friends	Helps understand, not just memorize, the content	**Adds a new dimension to the content; encourages deep reflection. Symbolic of all the class connections that promote learning**
Role of Self	Detached; does not willingly share	Participates willingly but as an observer	Gets involved and makes friends	Shares identity and personal experiences; makes a personal commitment to class	Changes as a result of the class
Learning in TTLC	No change or added learning from the experience	Appreciates new experiences because not boring; can improve study and class skills	Higher grades because group work promotes increased study time	Personal growth and understanding from others' experiences	Deep and complex; new understanding of topics

across individuals. Tennant interviewed 16 students and grouped their perceptions into five categories shown in Table 1. In each category, the dimension **in bold type** appeared to Tennant as central and foundational to the other perceptions in that category, and helped to define the meaning of the category as a whole. The four higher categories are hierarchical and build upon one another. Tennant related these categories to student intellectual development and meaning-making about learning in a learning community. She proposed that understanding these different categories of student response to learning communities could help instructors better design learning experiences that would assist them in conceptualizing the learning community at the highest level possible.

Habits of Mind: The Experimental College Program at Berkeley

Katherine Bernhardt Trow (1998) undertook a qualitative study of the long-term effect of one of the early, pioneering learning community programs, Joseph Tussman's Experimental College Program at the University of California-Berkeley. This program, which ran for two, two-year cycles (1965-69) was an interdisciplinary coordinated studies program modeled after Alexander Meiklejohn's earlier Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (1927-32). The integrated team-taught program of lectures, seminars, and tutorials comprised "virtually the whole of the students' first two undergraduate years" (2). With funding support from FIPSE (the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for Improving the Quality of Post-Secondary Education), Trow set out to discover what effects the program had "on the lives of its participants, on their subsequent education, their jobs, and careers . . . two decades after they had left it" (3). She interviewed 40 alumni about their memories of the program, and about its influence on their lives since leaving college. Trow's study, published as the book, *Habits of Mind,* is remarkable for its exhaustively detailed account of the philosophy that underpinned the Experimental College program as well as its curriculum (built, like Meiklejohn's around democracy and citizenship), its pedagogy, and the unique learning space for the program—a house next to the Berkeley campus. She detailed students' memories of each of these program elements and the challenging nature of a learning environment based on active conversations about key texts. She described how students framed the program's effect on their moral and political development, their educational and cognitive development, and their personal development as a college student. Trow closed her study with this important insight:

> One of the most significant findings of this study is that participants could not have adequately assessed the full effect of the Program at its end or even after they finished college or graduate school. They were not then in a position to judge its impact on their professional and occupational lives or their family lives . . . Above all, the study has shown that graduation is not the end of the learning experience. We have found ex-students from the Program still thinking about what they learned there, still exploring the meaning of their educational experiences, still arguing with each other, and their teachers . . . Surveys of students at the time of graduation or soon after are quick, convenient, and inexpensive, but can be misleadingly incomplete if the nature

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of the program requires reflection for a proper assessment. This study demonstrates the value of intensive, extensive, personal interviews in revealing the long-term impacts of programs such as these. It is clear from their testimony that an educational experience as strong as the Experimental College Program continues to have significant and cumulative effects at least for the next few decades after students leave the Program, and probably, for some of them, for the rest of their lives. (411)

Struggling for Knowledge: Students, Coordinated Studies, and Collaborative Learning

Patricia E. Russo (1995) interviewed 70 students enrolled in interdisciplinary, team-taught coordinated studies programs at "Urban Central Community College," (a pseudonym), a college with highly diverse learners. She was interested in how a well-established learning community program with a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary curriculum and collaborative learning might enable first-generation, diverse learners to become more successful. As a student of Vincent Tinto's doing her research under the auspices of the National Center for Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment, Russo wanted to explore ways learning communities foster student engagement and "connectedness" to the academic enterprise of college learning. However, she also was intrigued by William Tierney's (1993) challenge to Tinto's theory, which argued that "for people of color, a model that purports connectedness to the college often threatens to leave their cultures at the college door, or to give them up completely as they enter the world of white, middle-class college graduates." Tierney suggested that to feel connected would, or could, mean giving up one's own culture. "How can a college or university adjust to help students fit comfortably into a social climate that is vastly different from the social climate they are used to?"(11). "The results of this study," Russo said, "fall into the middle of this conversation" (11).

To understand students' experiences in the coordinated studies programs at "Urban Central," Russo discovered that three important dimensions of the student experience had to be considered: students' struggles to attend college, participate actively in the classroom, and understand a new paradigm for learning that involved construction of their own knowledge. She found that learning community programs played a significant role in helping students make connections across disciplines, with peers, and between the knowledge and values they brought to the college and their classroom experiences. She learned that diversity in course content and among students provided a safe, stimulating, and supportive learning environment. Russo's research is notable for explicitly examining the potential and challenges of collaborative learning environments for diverse college learners.

Multiple-Institution Research Studies

Nine research studies involved more than one institution, with the number of institutions in any one study ranging from two to 365. Some reports described specific learning community programs, while others gave no information about

the nature of the learning communities involved. Some studies used a single assessment tool or approach, while others involved a range of instruments and approaches. Some were exploratory and relatively informal, while others were formal and tightly organized. Each report has made a distinct contribution to the body of learning community knowledge. While most of these studies examined outcomes for students in learning community settings, one report—the culminating report of a FIPSE project—focused on the institutional issues related to the development of learning community initiatives (MacGregor 1999).

These multi-institution studies add a valuable perspective that is distinct from the single-institution studies. By taking more of a research slant, and by using common instruments or approaches across multiple institutional contexts, these studies can address comparative information about practices and results. The best of these studies reflect a synthesis of understanding across multiple institutions and offer a promising arena for illuminating learning communities and the student outcomes achieved within them. The studies are annotated in Appendix C.