

# III

## Single-Institution Assessment Reports

# Single-Institution Assessment Reports

Because learning community programs represent ambitious reform initiatives, we believe that assessment reports are vitally important. They serve the functions of (1) educating key decision-makers as well as the wider campus about the intentions and design of the learning community initiative; (2) disseminating information about learning communities outcomes, not only student outcomes but also outcomes for those involved in teaching in and supporting the program; and (3) making recommendations for next steps, for learning community improvement, and for assessment strategy. In addition, because the learning community program and its assessments are continuously evolving, each assessment report has significance for the learning community program's institutional history in that it describes—or should describe—the learning community program and progress at a particular point in time.

## Strategies for Analysis of the Reports

In evaluating the 119 assessment reports, we first wanted to know the audience or purpose of the learning community initiative, and what kinds of evidence were gathered to assess the program. We identified the:

- type of institution, date, and authors of the assessment document
- nature of the document (institutional assessment report, conference presentation, journal article, report to a granting agency)
- primary curricular arena for the learning community program (developmental, freshman program, general education program, study in the major, other)
- the number of students, faculty, or staff in a study sample or in a comparison group
- evidence of impact (student persistence; academic success; student self-report of gains, experiences or attitudes; learning gains; intellectual development; program implementation; student perceptions of the learning community role and value; faculty and staff response to the program)
- methodology for gathering data (rates of course completion, retention, and persistence; grade point averages or pass rates; commercially available instruments; locally designed tests/exams/student work; focus groups or interviews; document reviews; observation)

A matrix that provides all of these details for each study can be found in Appendix D.

We could not identify definitively each learning community's curricular structure. While every learning community program included a number of classes explicitly linked to one another and/or to living in a common residence hall, the curricular structure of the program was often not precisely described. In other cases, learning community terminology was used so broadly that knowing the degree to which faculty members teaching learning community courses asked students to make connections among them was impossible. For example, the term Freshman Interest Group in one study referred to clusters of classes in which faculty attempted no curricular coordination; in another study, Freshman Interest Group referred to a set of classes where faculty members explicitly carried out "integrated learning blocks." In one study, a "course cluster"

*Because learning community programs represent ambitious reform initiatives, we believe that assessment reports are vitally important.*

amounted to five semester credits; in another, a “course cluster” amounted to fifteen. Because of these inconsistencies, we could not confidently sort these studies into particular types of learning community structures or degrees of curricular integration.

### **Description of the Studies**

The 119 single-institution assessment reports represented 78 different institutions. Of these, 23 were community colleges, 54 were baccalaureate institutions (35 of them research institutions), and one was a technical institute; Table 2 further delineates this breakdown. Most (75) of the reports were unpublished; the remainder were journal articles (17), conference papers or presentations drawn from assessment work (19), and reports to granting agencies (7).

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Institutions Represented in the Single-Institution Learning Community Assessment Reports**

<b>Type of Institution</b>	<b>Number of institutions submitting reports</b>	<b>Percent of total</b>
Research	<b>33</b>	<b>43</b>
Comprehensive	<b>15</b>	<b>19</b>
Community College	<b>23</b>	<b>30</b>
Liberal Arts College – U.S.	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Liberal Arts – International	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Technical Institute	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
Total	<b>78</b>	<b>100</b>

Slightly over half (52%) of the reports described learning community programs launched primarily as freshman interventions, although in fact, almost all of the learning communities were designed for first-year students. Some, however, targeted underprepared students (12%) or specific majors, usually engineering or science (16%). Twenty percent focused on general education outcomes, and the remaining 10% addressed other populations. The percentages sum to more than 100% because some of institutional reports focused on several types of learning communities developed for different purposes.

To their credit, most studies looked at more than one indicator to assess evidence of learning community impact. The two outcomes analyzed most frequently were persistence (usually defined as enrollment in the next academic term or at the beginning of the next academic year) and academic success (usually measured by grades, course completion, or pass rates). Fifty percent of the reports studied persistence and 56% studied academic success. Student self-reports describing their experiences, gains, and overall satisfaction were almost as common, with 45% of the reports looking at these outcomes with respect to

students' overall experience of college and another 40% looking at these outcomes specifically in connection to the learning community. Relatively few studies used measures other than self-report (e.g., tests, writing samples, portfolios) to assess learning gains (18%) or intellectual development (6%). Although 24% considered faculty and administrative perspectives for evidence of impact, only three studies reported solely on outcomes from those perspectives.

Just as institutions looked at more than one indicator to assess success, they employed more than one methodology, as well. Given the emphasis upon persistence and academic success, it is not surprising that retention rates and grade point averages/pass rates were the most common methods used. Locally designed surveys or instruments were administered much more frequently than commercially available surveys (see Appendix E for a list of the commercially available instruments used by each institution). The advantages of lower costs, more precision in tailoring questions to meet program needs, and greater ownership in the data collection process may have prompted institutions to use locally designed surveys, while institutions interested in normative data turned to commercially available instruments. Examination of student work, in the form of performance on tests, samples of student writing, or portfolios was a less common method, used in only 18% of the studies. Slightly more frequent were focus groups or individual interviews, conducted in 22% of the studies.

### Trends and Observations

We will not draw sweeping generalizations based on studies that vary widely in the nature of their curricular interventions, although they all fall under the umbrella term "learning communities." *That disclaimer aside, we can say definitively that those studies that looked at retention, academic success, and satisfaction reported overwhelmingly positive results. These findings held without regard to the size of the study or the type of learning community undertaken, suggesting that even modest learning community initiatives are likely to reap positive outcomes.*

We can also say with confidence that:

- a) Learning communities are being developed in all types of institutions: two-year and four-year, small and large, public and private, comprehensive and research universities, liberal arts colleges, and technical institutes.
- b) Almost all learning communities are designed for freshmen, although they may target different groups of first-year students (e.g., underprepared students, high-achieving students, students in a particular major), and they address a variety of issues (e.g., general education outcomes, transition-to-college, academic major/career choices).
- c) Students and individuals who teach in learning communities generally like learning communities. Surveys, interviews and focus group data repeatedly reveal that the large majority of students and their teachers find learning communities to be positive.
- d) Studies of learning communities for underprepared students show very positive results with respect to retention; completion of sequential, college-level courses; academic achievement; and learning gains.
- e) Schools of Engineering appear to be emerging leaders in learning

*... we can say definitively that those studies that looked at retention, academic success, and satisfaction reported overwhelmingly positive results. These findings held without regard to the size of the study or the type of learning community undertaken . . .*

*These and other studies like them are noteworthy because they focused on learning outcomes and used performance-based measures to assess them.*

community curriculum reform for academic majors. These initiatives, funded in large part by National Science Foundation grants, are exceptional for the high degree of integration among math, science, and engineering courses; the intentional incorporation of active and cooperative learning pedagogical strategies; and the thoroughness of their assessment designs.

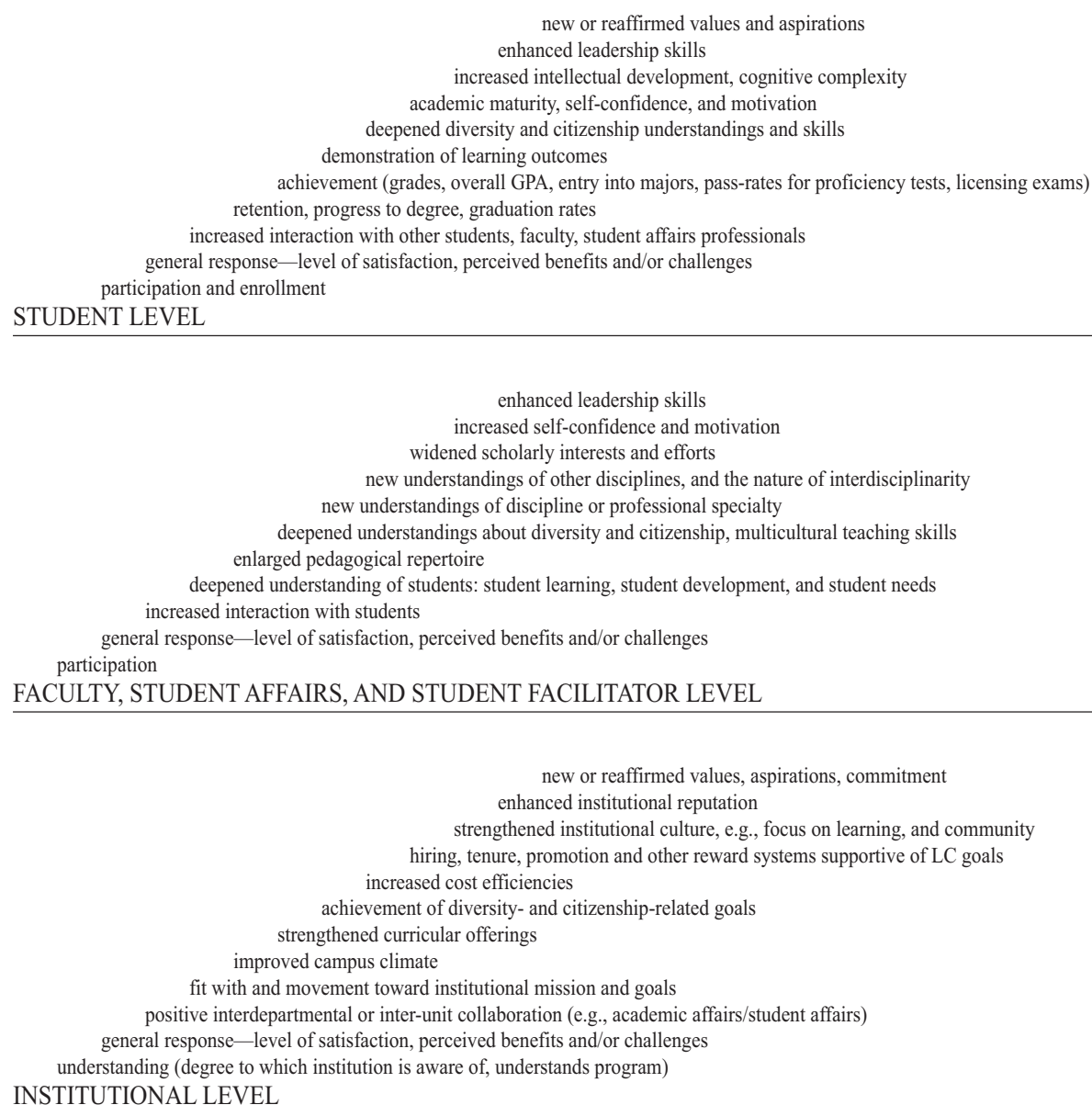
- f) Typical of much of higher education assessment, the outcomes studied most frequently tend to be those that are easiest to quantify: rates of retention, grade point averages, and satisfaction. Indeed, student retention and success are critical indicators of a strong program for entering students, and positive results for these outcomes are often needed to help the learning community program demonstrate its viability to the larger campus community.
- g) Several reports, **Bowling Green State University** (9), **Indiana State University** (40), **Iowa State University** (44), the **University of Northern Colorado** (76), and **Washington State University** (105), were particularly effective in analyzing the fiscal impact of increased retention. The numbers after each institution's name correspond with the numbers of the reports listed in the summary matrix (Appendix D) and bibliography (Appendix F).

Finally, given the truism “we assess what we value, and we value what we assess,” it is worth noting that two outcomes valued highly in higher education—learning gains and intellectual development—were infrequently assessed, at least not through external measures, although self-reported measures were common. There were exceptions, of course. **Portland State University** (79) used a portfolio review of its Freshman Inquiry program to conduct a performance-based program assessment of the four goals of its University Studies Program: critical thinking, communications, appreciation of human diversity, and ethics and social responsibility. Faculty applied rubrics to analyze student work and assess proficiency. **University of New England** (67) administered the Measure of Intellectual Development (MID) to students in a yearlong, integrated science learning community to assess the impact of the curriculum upon students' complexity of thinking. Similarly, **Daytona Beach Community College** (23) used the MID to study students' intellectual development in its yearlong, freshman interdisciplinary learning community. **College of the Desert** (22) measured learning gains in reading and writing by comparing changes in reading and writing test scores of underprepared students enrolled in clustered learning communities versus those not enrolled in learning communities. Among a variety of outcome measures, **California State University, Hayward** (15) assessed for improved pass rates on the CSU-mandated rising junior writing exam. Students at CSU-Hayward participated in yearlong course clusters established as a general education requirement for all entering students. These and other studies like them are noteworthy because they focused on learning outcomes *and* used performance-based measures to assess them.

Given the immense potential of learning communities to help students, learning community teaching teams, and institutions attain a complex array of goals, studies like those cited above stand out because they assess goals that fall higher on the “staircase” of possible outcomes. Figure 1 depicts the “Ascending Steps of Learning Community Goals”—a graphic that attempts to summarize the many and varied goals set out for these programs (MacGregor 2000). Learning

community leaders often describe goals for students, for teachers, and even goals that their institution might realize from the learning community initiative. The “steps” on these staircases are not meant to suggest that one goal precedes or leads to another. Rather, the most frequently stated and most concrete goals are at the lowest steps of the staircase, while more complex and ineffable goals occur on the higher steps. In the preponderance of assessment studies we reviewed, the emphasis was on student and teacher outcomes at the lower ends of the staircases; institutional outcomes were rarely explored.

**Figure 1. Ascending Steps of Learning Community Goals**





*We believe that as reform initiatives, learning community programs need to be described as fully as possible . . .*

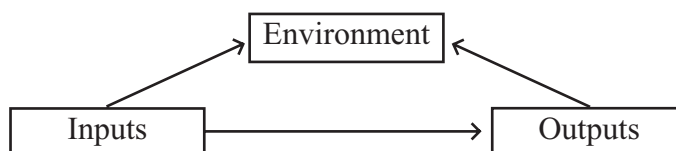
However, if learning community assessment is to move toward assessing higher order goals, assessment studies need to focus on those goals. Furthermore, studies need to take place over greater lengths of time. With a small number of exceptions, most of the single-institution studies submitted were conducted over relatively short periods of time—typically, one academic term or one year. Gains in learning and cognitive complexity often take place gradually, and require longitudinal designs or, at least, longer intervals between pre- and post-measures, to document growth. Similarly, gains for faculty members and others who serve on teaching teams often occur over time as these individuals develop their skills at learning community teaching and reflect on the role learning community work plays in their professional development. Admittedly, longer-term studies are a difficult “sell” in typical institutional reporting cycles and in political and institutional climates that want answers immediately.

### “Notable” Assessment Reports

Beyond the methodologies and content of learning community assessments, we were interested in the nature and quality of the *assessment reports* themselves. As Vincent Tinto’s preface argues, a learning community initiative represents ambitious reform work on a campus—work that is pressed to prove itself and to strengthen its practices at the same time. We believe that as reform initiatives, learning community programs need to be described as fully as possible, so that learning community program participants, decision-makers, and the wider campus community have the fullest-possible understanding of what has been attempted and why, what results occurred, and what next steps might be taken in program development. We therefore looked at the level of detail of these assessment reports in terms of how fully they described the learning community initiative and we examined the quality of the studies overall—robustness of assessment approach, and clarity and readability of the assessments themselves.

For this analysis of the assessment reports, we built upon Alexander Astin’s I-E-O assessment framework. This framework assumes that a complete story of an educational intervention requires a description and analysis of the Inputs, or the students as they enter an educational program; the curricular and co-curricular Environment that comprises the program (that is, the nature of the educational intervention), and the program’s Outputs or Outcomes. Understanding these three elements, Astin argues, enables identification of “value added” by the program. Astin illustrates this I-E-O relationship as a triangle, as shown in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2. Alexander Astin’s I-E-O framework**



*Astin, A. W. Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education. Copyright © 1991. Reproduced with permission from Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT.*

Astin's model is useful for creating a full picture of a program and its effects. In their forthcoming book on learning communities, Barbara Leigh Smith and her colleagues Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Faith Gabelnick offer an elaborated version of this model, and argue that *an even more robust picture of intervention and impact is necessary for fully describing, understanding and improving reform initiatives*. As they put it,

*Besides describing student characteristics at the “Inputs” point, we believe it is important to capture other dimensions of inputs, the learning community program’s stated intentions, the composition of the learning community teaching teams, and the nature of investments in the program (resources, administrative planning and coordination, curricular planning, faculty and staff development). As Astin suggests, it is also essential to describe the teaching and learning Environment that is being established in the learning community offerings: the curricular and co-curricular elements, and the kinds of pedagogical practices that teaching teams use. Descriptions of program Outcomes naturally focus on students, but our additional intentions for learning communities are to create stronger communities of practice around teaching, and to influence curricula and institutions in positive ways. Learning community assessment should therefore focus on these dimensions as well. Finally, assessments should present Conclusions and Recommendations based on an analysis of Inputs and Intentions, Environment and Outcomes (Smith et al. forthcoming).*

**Figure 3. An Assessment Framework for Learning Communities**

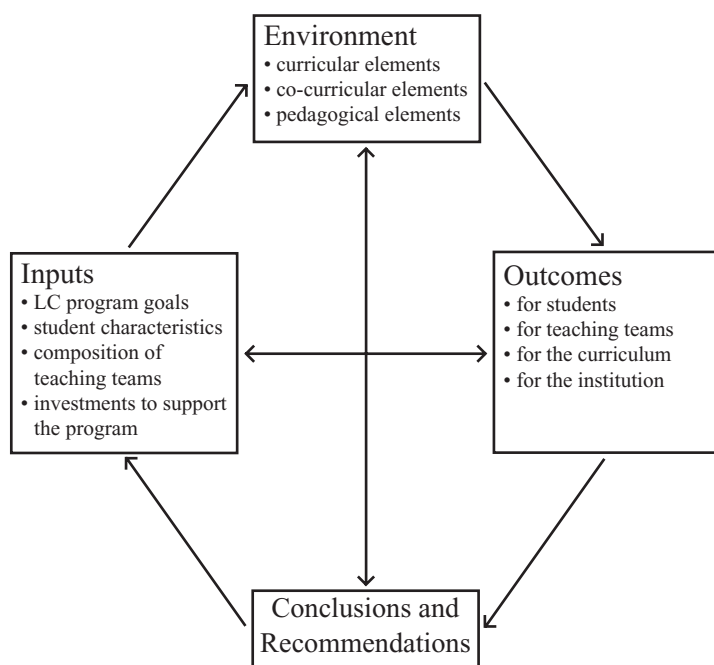




Figure 3 represents this expanded assessment framework. With this framework in mind, we examined the 119 single-institution assessment reports, looking for those that addressed most of our expanded criteria for Inputs, Environment, Outcomes, and Conclusions. After narrowing the pool, we chose a set of seventeen reports to showcase.

These notable learning community assessment reports did not necessarily have the most complex or ambitious research design—although all of them represent solid, credible investigations. Nor was their learning community program necessarily the most ambitious. Rather, these assessment reports stood out because they:

- clearly explained their learning community program’s intentions and inputs
- aligned their assessment with these intentions
- provided a clear context for their work by describing the curriculum and pedagogy of their learning community program and the student audience who engaged in it
- offered clear results
- in many instances presented recommendations for strengthening the learning community initiative or the assessment of it

In short, these reports were impressive assessment reports that helped readers learn about the nature of the learning community program, the nature of its students and teachers, its impact, and in many instances, implications or recommendations for next steps. While some reports were lengthy, others were as short as six pages; assessment reports did not have to be voluminous to be impressive.

One caveat: We identified the notable reports without regard to their curricular area, learning community structure, or origin. When we looked at the reports as a group, we realized there were a preponderance of studies from larger research institutions, perhaps because of greater resources (both external and internal) for institutional assessment. The next chapter describes each of these seventeen notable reports, and the final chapter offers conclusions overall.