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Future Directions for
Learning Community
Research and Assessment

Future Directions for Learning Community Research and Assessment

This review of more than 150 learning community research studies and assessment reports represents a substantial range of institutions and programs, and will soon be augmented by new work on the horizon. Under the auspices of a grant from the Lumina Foundation, the Higher Education Program at Syracuse University is conducting a major research project (2003-05) on learning communities specifically targeted to underprepared, low-income students. Also with Lumina Foundation funding, The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (headquartered at Indiana University), in partnership with the American Association for Higher Education, is undertaking a project called DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practices); it is examining practices at a number of institutions where student NSSE scores have been especially impressive. Several of these institutions have learning community programs in place. Furthermore, the American Association for Higher Education will soon be publishing a monograph on the Restructuring for Urban Student Success (RUSS) Project, a Pew Trusts-funded initiative that engaged three urban institutions (Portland State, Temple, and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis) in mutual self-reflection and assessment related to their learning community initiatives (Laufgraben et al., forthcoming). These projects, along with a myriad other smaller-scale initiatives at individual institutions, will continue to add to the growing body of knowledge about learning communities.

As we reflected on what was present and what was missing in the assessment reports and research studies available to us, we identified four areas that needed improvement. Some of those areas pertained to gaps in our knowledge; others related to weaknesses in presentation. If we are to deepen our understanding of learning communities, both areas—content and process—must improve. On that basis, we make the following recommendations:

To improve our knowledge of learning communities:

1. The potential for learning communities to address deeper and more varied outcomes is vast and largely unmeasured. Institutions need to assess those outcomes that fall higher on the “staircase” of learning community goals (Figure 1, page 21), and need to broaden the scope of outcomes to include faculty, institutional, *and* student outcomes.
2. It is reassuring—but insufficient—to know that learning communities produce positive outcomes. Studies that correlate results to pedagogical practices, curricular structures, or learning activities will help to clarify the reasons learning communities are successful and the features that teachers and students should develop and sustain.
3. Pursuit of deeper and more complex outcomes will require study over extended periods of time. More longitudinal work is needed to assess the impact of the learning community experience on students, faculty, and institutions.

To improve the presentation of our work:

4. Telling the story of an initiative is important; telling the story *effectively* is imperative. The assessment studies identified as notables told their learning community story effectively, both internally to an institution and externally to a

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wider higher education audience. The notable studies:

- clearly indicated the institution, date, and authors of the study or report
- provided thorough and clear program intentions and descriptions, not taking for granted that the specific intervention would be well understood by the report reader (a consideration important even for internal institutional reports); curriculum, pedagogy, co-curricular experiences, and the nature of faculty collaboration should be described thoroughly in research studies and assessment reports
- aligned intentions and outcomes clearly
- usually provided information about the students who enrolled in the learning community, and noted whether the students were similar or different from comparison groups
- included a relatively complex set of questions raised by the investigation and a diverse set of measures exploring the complex set of outcomes inherent in learning communities
- portrayed their results and recommended improvements clearly
- were self-reflective, unafraid to muse “aloud” about the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment approach taken, the findings and their implications, and the change process required to act upon the implications
- were accessible and interesting to read

Demonstrable evidence exists that learning communities, structured in a variety of ways, are a proven and effective strategy for improving undergraduate education with respect to student persistence, performance, and perceptions of satisfaction and learning. Much work remains to be done to broaden, deepen, and clarify these results and their implications. Not all learning communities are created equally, and not every student benefits equally from every intervention. We need to understand these interactions better to identify *which* aspects of learning communities are effective in *which* ways with *which* students.

The good news is that in many ways learning communities and outcomes assessment are parallel and intertwined movements in higher education that have “grown up” together and share many of the same proponents and sensibilities. The leading edge of outcomes assessment work has grown increasingly sophisticated and nuanced in its approach to understanding student learning and exploring the conditions that promote learning most effectively. We expect that this work will increasingly become part of the learning community landscape. A future compendium on learning community research and assessment will then be able to offer deeper and more complex evidence for the power of learning communities to make a difference in student learning and in students' lives.

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