

# Executive Summary

## Impetus for the Study

In the past twenty years, learning communities (strategies for enrolling cohort groups of students in a common set of classes often organized around a theme, and often linked with residence life experiences) have sprung up across the higher education landscape. While many individuals have expressed enthusiasm about the promise of learning communities for student engagement and success, evidence of the effectiveness of these programs has remained hidden in a small number of dissertations, diverse journal articles, and the fugitive literature of internal institutional assessment reports.

Responding to scores of requests for a synthesis of learning community research and assessment, the National Learning Communities Project undertook the first major systematic review of learning community research and assessment to examine how studies were being undertaken and what results they were reporting. Four of us, Kathe Taylor, William S. Moore, Jean MacGregor, and Jerri Lindblad, collaboratively assembled as many research studies and assessment reports as we could locate, analyzed them, and drew conclusions about the efficacy of learning communities and the needs for future learning community research and assessment. This monograph reports on our work. In addition, a set of appendices cites and describes every study we examined.

## Major Findings

1. As of 2003, learning community programs have a broad reach in higher education in the United States:
  - a) Learning communities are well-established or are being developed in a wide variety of institutions: two- and four-year, small and large, public and private, comprehensive and research universities, liberal arts colleges, and technical institutes.
  - b) Learning community programs come in a wide variety of curricular and curricular/co-curricular formats, and while most programs are designed for first-year students, some have been designed for upper-class students as well.
2. Most of the research and assessment on learning communities reveal promising results:
  - a) A preponderance of studies indicate that learning communities strengthen student retention and academic achievement, and that both students and teachers in learning communities say that their learning community experience is positive.
  - b) Both research and assessment studies point to numbers of noteworthy and effective learning community initiatives in programs for entering students, general education coursework, freshman engineering programs, living/learning communities and in pre-college/developmental education.
3. Learning community assessment and research can and should probe more deeply into the nature of learning community interventions, and the nature of their impact on the learning of students, those who serve on teaching teams, and institutions.
  - a) Most of the assessment studies focus on indicators that are easiest to quantify (student retention, grades, and grade point averages), and on student survey data related to basic satisfaction (and to a small extent, engagement). In general, these results solidly support learning community programs. However, much less assessment work focuses on direct measures of and/or external

judgments about the nature and extent of student learning in learning communities.

- b) Research studies are more variable in their methodology: many gathered quantitative data such as retention and academic achievement information and also explored students' perceptions of their learning community experience through qualitative methods. Like the assessment studies, few research studies examined the nature and quality of student learning, other than the small number that looked at student intellectual development.
- c) Very little research and assessment on learning communities has explored the effects of these programs on the faculty, student affairs staff, students, librarians, and other individuals who serve on learning community teaching teams. These teaching teams are themselves "learning communities" of professionals collaborating on behalf of improved curricula and greater student learning and success; the quality and sustainability of these initiatives depend on the communities of teaching practice that emerge around them. The small number of dissertations that have focused on the role of learning community teaching in faculty development and vitality indicate that this is a promising arena for future study.
- d) With the exception of one case study report associated with a FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education) project, no research studies have focused exclusively on institutional matters or leadership issues related to the developing, institutionalizing, and sustaining of learning community initiatives.
- e) From both assessment and research studies, we still have much to learn about the learning community curricula and co-curricular activities, and about the pedagogy and assessment approaches used within these programs. Because learning community programs are so highly variable in terms of their curricular, co-curricular, and pedagogical elements, research and assessment studies need to describe these interventions with much more specificity. Furthermore, while most studies revealed that learning community programs were successful, they generally did not point to the factors that may have influenced these results.

Our identification of gaps and our criticisms about the depth of these studies are by no means unique to work on learning communities. The field of assessment, which has "grown up" in the same era as learning community development in this country, has the same needs to move more deeply into the nature of student learning and the nature of professional development for faculty and staff members. Assessment and research must also embrace the challenging work of illuminating practices within programs that influence those outcomes. Learning communities represent a rich intersection of curriculum and co-curriculum and of student engagement and learning. Research and assessment can strengthen and deepen learning communities. In turn, learning communities provide fertile ground for strengthening and deepening higher education research and assessment.

We hope that this study will affirm the significant work that has been done and encourage those engaged in learning community research and assessment to tell their stories of innovation more effectively.