

WORKING TOGETHER FROM THE GROUND UP

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

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Learning Community Vision: To support Iowa State University's commitment to student learning, the Learning Community initiative seeks to enhance our undergraduates' experience by providing all interested students dynamic, focused communities in which students, staff, and faculty can learn and grow together.

Beginning the Work

Learning communities began at Iowa State University (ISU) in 1994 as a grass roots effort. This work was initiated during a decade of change in which this research-intensive university focused on ways to enhance student learning. Programs were being developed to improve teaching, develop student outcomes assessment plans, and learn more about student development theory.

Staff at the Department of Residence jump-started interest—learning communities were seen as a way to address a multitude of needs and interests at the university. Residence staff in student affairs invited colleagues from similar institutions to participate in a panel presentation on learning communities. This presentation was open to the entire campus and was followed by an invitation from the provost to a broad cross-section of faculty and staff to attend a learning communities conference in Miami.

An enthusiastic group of student affairs and academic affairs staff and faculty returned from the conference and began to meet on Friday afternoons to develop a plan to implement learning communities at Iowa State. This working group—supported by senior administrators—provided the beginning of a strong partnership between academic and student affairs professionals. The result has been a successful learning communities program that spans all areas of the university.

The Result: Learning Communities in All Shapes and Forms

Learning communities at Iowa State University now serve over 2,500 students through nearly seventy diverse learning communities located

in all six undergraduate colleges. Each learning community develops its own goals and learning outcomes, within the context of broader university outcomes. This allows for many different models or variations of learning communities. (See the appendix for a complete list of ISU's learning communities.)

Each learning community clusters a cohort of students into two or three classes, or a residential hall and at least one class. In some cases students are merely co-enrolled in courses. In other programs the courses are "linked" through faculty collaboration and curricular connections between important components. Other elements of learning communities include co-curricular activities, career information, study assistance, cultural and social events, and other programs of interest to students that help integrate activities in and out of class. Each learning community also has an undergraduate peer mentor who performs a variety of duties. These tasks may include organizing study groups and social activities, planning cultural events, assisting in teaching seminars, helping with recruitment, and building connections with faculty.

Approximately twenty-two of the more than seventy learning communities on campus are residential. Students in a typical residential program live on the same residence hall floor together. They comprise no more than fifty percent of a floor so that students have the support of a cohort but also live with a diverse group of non-learning community students. This residential model has worked effectively for over ten years. Peer mentors live on the floor with the residential learning community members. Ideally, a residential learning community "team" consists of the academic coordinator of the learning community (often an academic advisor), the Hall Director, the Community Assistant (undergraduate residence staff), and the peer mentor (undergraduate staff hired by the learning community coordinator). Although the coordinator "runs" the program, residence staff offer ongoing input.

Academic advisors also serve as coordinators in non-residential learning communities. Community is established in various ways—including developing a seminar to meet the needs of learning community students, forming study groups that meet in the library, sponsoring student-faculty lunches, organizing field trips, attending campus events together, and participating in community service projects.

A Path of Collaboration: How We Got From There to Here

The evolution of ISU's learning community program is a story of dedication, hard work, connections, serendipity, celebrations, and

luck stirred together with Midwestern values and a perfect storm of opportunities. The initial planners' goals were as varied as the areas of the university they represented—improving undergraduate education, increasing retention, focusing more holistically on student learning, or just being more engaged with each other and building connections outside the silos of their departments and colleges. This seemingly “soft” goal is of real concern at ISU, a large institution comprised of many autonomous units within both academic and student affairs. This division into separate units can lead to isolation and a diminished sense of belonging to the larger institution. Learning communities, with their mission to cross traditional boundaries, offered new possibilities for breaking down these barriers.

From the beginning the organizational structure established for learning communities ensured that academic affairs and student affairs would jointly administer the program and the budget. In 1998, then-President Martin Jischke allocated \$1.5 million dollars for a three-year pilot program to advance learning communities at ISU. He insisted that there be equal involvement from both student affairs and academic affairs. As a result, a true partnership evolved, with both opportunities and challenges.

Step 1: Forming Administrative and Organizational Structures

ISU's commitment to joint leadership and an equal partnership between academic and student affairs was built into its organizational model. To this end, it was important to find compatible leaders who had the authority to make decisions and the time allocated to effectively lead and sustain the initiative. The administration appointed two co-directors who also held university administrative positions: the Director of the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, who reports to the Associate Provost for Academic Programs, and the Assistant Director of Residence for Academic Services, who reports to the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs. The directors were tasked with coordinating the design and implementation of learning communities and overseeing a jointly administered budget. Although there can often be a perceived power differential between student affairs and academic affairs, we believe the partnership was truly 50-50, with both principals consistently working to respect the balance. Having joint responsibility for the budget helped to ensure feelings of equality.

A broad-based Learning Community Advisory Committee was also formed, made up of approximately twenty faculty and staff, including associate deans, academic advisors, faculty, representatives and staff

members from the Academic Success Center, Registrar's office, Department of Residence, Dean of Students' office and Enrollment Services. The advisory group brought diverse opinions from across the campus and assisted in developing critical professional relationships that, in many cases, had not previously existed. This advisory committee is still the primary tool for cross-campus communication about learning communities. It continues to develop policies and procedures for implementation and sustainability of learning communities at ISU. Its broad representation and egalitarian structure empowers individuals and makes it possible to expand and decentralize leadership.

Along with the advisory committee, vital subcommittees were formed with representatives from across student and academic affairs. Through these committees, over fifty additional volunteers came together to support the learning community effort, building professional relationships that enhanced student learning. These subcommittees focus on assessment, curriculum development, faculty involvement, peer mentors, marketing, and an annual Learning Community Institute. Each committee develops annual goals which tend to focus on "best practices," training and development assistance, and resources for learning community coordinators.

This collaborative organizational structure has benefited everyone. Both faculty and staff report experiencing renewed professional vitality and feeling empowered by this broad-based structure. Students become part of a caring community that takes a holistic view of their education. And administrators become more educated about the importance of focusing on student learning initiatives.

Step 2: Establishing a Clear Vision and Learning Outcomes

The first tasks for the newly-formed advisory committee were to develop an overarching vision and clear, easy-to-measure learning outcomes. We established the vision and learning outcomes at a two-day retreat attended by a broad representation of both student affairs and academic affairs professionals. The learning outcomes this group developed include desired outcomes for faculty and staff, as well as students. We have kept these outcomes at the center of our work, referring to them often, and publicizing them widely.

The outcomes have been periodically revised, growing and changing as the learning communities initiative has matured; consequently they continue to incorporate and reflect broader strategic outcomes identified by both academic and student affairs. The advisory committee also developed a definition of ISU learning communities (included at the

Iowa State University Outcomes

The following intended outcomes provide a framework for continuous assessment and improvement. Individual learning communities will develop relevant intended outcomes that are consistent with the following university outcomes.

Students in learning communities will:

- develop a sense of belonging in the university community
- experience higher academic achievement
- increase curricular and co-curricular collaborative interactions with other students, faculty and staff
- more readily achieve the articulated learning outcomes specified by departments or programs
- demonstrate increased awareness of departmental, college, and university resources
- demonstrate improved critical thinking and collaborative problem solving skills
- demonstrate improved knowledge and skills related to career opportunities
- demonstrate a better understanding of differences and similarities among people
- experience a higher level of satisfaction with the university experience
- show a greater rate of persistence as a result of all of the above

Faculty and staff in learning communities will experience:

- increased collaboration with students, faculty and staff
- increased implementation of active and collaborative teaching and learning strategies
- connections between curricular and co-curricular experiences
- increased knowledge about students and their development
- improved reflective practice
- disciplinary and interdisciplinary collegiality
- increased knowledge about university resources
- increased involvement in professional development activities
- increased connections between their learning community work and their scholarship
- increased recognition and rewards

end of this article) that allowed for variety and flexibility while keeping the enhancement of student learning at the heart of the initiative.

Step 3: Designing Authentic Assessment and Program Evaluation

It was essential to include assessment and evaluation strategies as an integral part of the development of learning communities from the very beginning. Student affairs and academic affairs professionals worked together to identify relevant learning outcomes, plan authentic assessment methodologies, design faculty and staff development programs and disseminate the results. An assessment subcommittee was formed and co-chaired by two extremely credible faculty members with long-term expertise in assessment. The committee included representatives from the Registrar's office (which maintained the learning community participant database), Institutional Research, and Department of Residence assessment staff, as well as other interested faculty and staff. This collective team provided the "staffing" to do the quality assessment necessary to prove the effectiveness of the learning community initiative. Their work ultimately helped justify the importance of permanent funding for the program. A complete listing of scholarly work can be found at the Iowa State University website (<http://www.lc.iastate.edu/papers.html>).

It has also been important to keep administrators at all levels well-informed about assessment and program evaluation results. Representatives have given presentations and published articles about this work in both professional arenas.

Step 4: Maintaining Communication Networks

Because learning communities emerged as an informal, grass roots effort that gained administrative support, it was essential to be cognizant and respectful of existing communication and authority channels while also creating new networks of communication. We continue to ask ourselves these questions: Who needs to be included in our communication network? Who needs to be at the table to help with decisions? Who needs to be informed? To maintain a spirit of integration and collaboration—and avoid creating a culture of isolation and competition—many conversations, meetings, and workshops continue to take place. Clear communication of our vision, goals, and assessment results to many different audiences both on and off campus is at the heart of this work.

It is also necessary to respect and understand that individuals have different perspectives, insights, and working styles due to their positions

within the university system. It is important to find opportunities for these individuals to work together for common purposes through workshops, retreats, conferences, and social events. In so doing we must also openly acknowledge differences and respect the diversity of subcultures of the university in order to facilitate open communication.

Step 5: Providing Meaningful Recognition and Rewards

We were fortunate that in 1999 ISU adopted a progressive promotion and tenure policy based upon the work of Ernest Boyer. This work incorporates a broad interpretation of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Our learning communities programs have provided rich opportunities for research and scholarship. Faculty, staff and graduate students have investigated topics such as faculty vitality, leadership development of peer mentors, significance of supplemental instruction, and many other dynamic learning community topics. These innovative, scholarly opportunities have energized and motivated professionals involved with learning communities. Providing networks of support and possibilities for scholarly outcomes for both academic and student affairs professionals has been essential.

Care has also been taken to publicly recognize the dedicated work of faculty and staff in student and academic affairs arenas, both internally and externally. We take the time to celebrate and enjoy accomplishments and progress, and acknowledge the dedication and achievements of both individuals and groups involved in the learning communities initiative. These acknowledgements include public recognition, notifying appropriate administrators, and more personalized appreciations. We make concerted, intentional efforts to have fun and to build an engaged, connected community.

What We've Learned

We've tried to be realistic about the process of change and integration into the formal system of the university. It was critical to begin small and grow incrementally. We needed to regularly remind ourselves that change is a continual process with no clearly defined end points. Change can be messy and takes time. When building collaborations across traditional boundaries, tensions and barriers are inevitable and need to be addressed. Those involved need time to focus and reflect on the progress made, time to plan for sustainability, and time to make informed adaptations of the original vision. As the learning communities initiative becomes more integrated into the formal fabric

of the university system, increased structure will become inevitable. Joint decision-making processes need to be safeguarded and honored for student affairs and academic affairs partnerships to succeed.

Campus-wide Positive Outcomes

Building strong collaborations between student affairs and academic affairs through the development of successful learning communities has been a win-win situation at Iowa State. Students have experienced a more successful transition to the university and benefit from a variety of enhancements such as active, connected learning; more interaction with faculty, staff, peer mentors, and other students; higher retention and graduation rates; and greater satisfaction with their learning experiences. Learning community faculty members say they feel more motivated and enthusiastic about their work. They also report that they have improved their teaching strategies, broadened their network of colleagues, expanded their awareness of multiple roles, found new opportunities for scholarship, and made deeper connections with students. Staff also report having experienced renewed professional vitality. They have increased their understanding, appreciation, and respect for the academic community while discovering new opportunities to teach both within and outside the classroom environment.

Successful partnerships ultimately depend upon the individuals involved. It is important to recruit professionals who bring a spirit of cooperation and collaboration to the table. We intentionally tried to create something new and dynamic while keeping the enhancement of student learning at the center of our mission. We had the good fortune of working with highly talented, dedicated faculty and student affairs staff who brought with them a “together we can make this work” attitude. When problems arose they maintained a spirit of “how can we make this better?” We developed a community based on a shared vision and universally good intentions. Laughter and fun were important dimensions of our revitalized culture. We found that the connections we made transcended traditional barriers and resulted in new roles and relationships that built community, created collaborative partnerships, and ultimately enhanced student learning.

APPENDIX

Core Characteristics of ISU Learning Programs

The Learning Community Advisory Committee recommends that in order to be defined as a learning community at Iowa State, each learning community should possess certain characteristics:

- clearly defined intended learning outcomes that reflect the University Learning Community intended outcomes and the academic program's intended outcomes
- integrated and connected curricular learning experiences
- collaborative, active learning experiences for students, faculty, and staff
- co-curricular activities that extend learning beyond the classroom
- clearly defined assessment and evaluation procedures that provide useful data for enhancing student learning
- clearly identified program administration and faculty/staff support structure
- effective connections between academic and student affairs programs

Iowa State University Learning Communities

(As of April 2003)

College of Agriculture

ACES (Agricultural Community Encourages Success)
 Agricultural Business
 Agricultural Education and Studies
 Agronomy
 AGPAQ (Agriculture students Providing integrated solutions to Agronomy & farm business management Questions)
 Animal Science/Dairy Science/Pre-Vet
 FSHN (Food Science & Human Nutrition)
 Horticulture
 ISU/DMACC (Iowa State University and Des Moines Area Community College collaboration)
 Microbiology (freshman & sophomore)
 Natural Resource Ecology & Mgmt
 Step Forward
 Technology (TLC)
 WiSE (Women in Science and Engineering)
 WiSE Transfer

College of Business

Business Learning Teams (BLTs)
Entrepreneurship and Innovation

College of Design

Design Collaborative
Design Exchange
Traveling Savanna Studio (sophomore)

College of Engineering

Agricultural Engineering (freshman, sophomore and junior)
CELTS (Computer Engineering Learning Teams)
Chemical Engineering
Civil Engineering Keystone
Construction Engineering Cornerstone
Electrical Engineering
Engineering Transfer
IDEAL (InDustrial Engineers Are Leaders)
Launch Pad (Aerospace Engineering)
LEAD (Leadership through Engineering Academic Diversity)
MELTS (Mechanical Engineering Learning Teams)
Undeclared Engineering
Undeclared Engineering Residential (C.L.U.E. - Community Living for Undeclared Engineers)
WiSE (Women in Science and Engineering)
WiSE Transfer

College of Human Sciences

AESHM (Apparel, Educational Studies and Hospitality Management)
Common Threads
Dance and Performing Arts
FSHN (Food Science & Human Nutrition)
Health and Human Performance (freshman & transfer)
HDFS (Human Development & Family Studies)
Step Forward
Transport
WiSE (Women in Science and Engineering)
WiSE Transfer

College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

BEST (Biology Education Success Teams)
BETAL (Biology Education Teaching & Learning)
Body and Mind

Computer Science
Computer Science Transition
Cultural Intersections
Dance and Performing Arts
Esprit de Corps
First CLASS (College of Liberal Arts & Sciences Search)
Gods, Guns, and Gold
Matter, Movement, and Meaning
News Flash: Earth in Crisis
Newspaper Physics
Pre-Law
WiSE (Women in Science and Engineering)
WiSE Transfer

Interdisciplinary Options

ACT (Advancing Citizenship Together)
American Intercultural & Gender Studies
Carver Academy
Entrepreneurship and Innovation
Freshman Honors Program
Hixson Opportunity Awards
Learning to Lead
Multicultural Learning Community
Multicultural Vision Program
Student Support Services Program
WiSE (Women in Science and Engineering)
WiSE Transfer

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