

# PREFACE

*Gwendolyn Jordan Dungy*

As a member of the Board of Trustees of a college that was preparing for its ten-year regional accreditation visit, I attended a meeting with the college's president, provost, deans, and board chair. At the meeting, the provost reported on a new program to assess students' skills at the beginning and end of their first year. This new initiative aligned the placement exam for entering students with first-year courses. The intent was to create new, interdisciplinary first-year courses to allow students to develop study, research, and writing skills, along with knowledge in specific areas, before full immersion in their majors. The provost was pleased with student progress and praised the faculty members who had created this new program.

While impressed with the innovative structure and appreciative of the work of the faculty, I thought of ways in which student affairs educators could enrich program planning and work with faculty to reinforce what students were taught in the classroom through programs and activities beyond the classroom. This new structure was a great fit for learning communities because the students who needed basic college skills to increase their chances for success would, for the most part, also require developmental courses.

When I suggested that student affairs be included as part of the team, I was met with a look of puzzlement from the provost. It was not that the provost was opposed to the suggestion; rather, the provost had not been introduced to the idea that student affairs colleagues are educators who are skilled at working with groups of students, including those in learning communities.

I was introduced to the value of learning communities in 1994 while working at the Association of American Colleges and Universities. At one of the association's meetings, Uri Treisman, a professor at The University of Texas at Austin and executive director of the Charles A. Dana Center, told a story about African American students taking calculus courses at the University of California, Berkeley. It is no secret that, historically, few African American, Latino, and Hispanic students do as well in mathematics as Asian and White students.

Treisman and his colleagues posited several ideas about the gap in achievement among these students. They selected twenty African American and twenty Chinese students to compare calculus

performances. They videotaped how the students studied and worked at solving problems. Their hypotheses about motivation, academic preparation, family support, and income did not distinguish the two groups of students. Instead, they found the major difference between the two groups was that the African American students studied and struggled alone to learn calculus while the Chinese students worked alone for some of the time, but would get together for meals and to review homework assignments. The Chinese students learned from each other; they reinforced learning among themselves (Treisman 1992).

When Professor Treisman told this story, I recalled my own college experience and how my fellow students and I often studied alone because faculty graded on a curve. However, the times of greatest learning were when I tutored or helped others learn. Tutoring meant engaging in deep learning rather than learning solely for an upcoming exam. Looking back, an incentive, such as grading based on how effectively group members worked together, would have broken down barriers to collaboration and promoted deeper learning. As members of learning communities share perspectives and make cases for their own ideas, they learn deeply from one another.

Today, colleges and universities have accepted the value of learning communities and are forming them in every discipline and at every level. This book illustrates for faculty and student affairs educators how collaborations are working at a variety of institutions. The programs and processes shared in this publication are a stimulus for greater collaboration between academic and student affairs to increase success among all students regardless of their starting points. As shared by Smith and Williams in the introduction, the most notable inter-institutional study on the communities is the “National Study of Living-Learning Programs.” NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International, ACPA-College Student Educators International, and the National Science Foundation are supporting the next phase of the study because we see opportunities for enhancing learning through strong collaborations between academic and student affairs.

Interestingly, in the same meeting mentioned earlier, concern was expressed about the racial imbalance among faculty at the institution. White and Asian faculty were well represented in all the disciplines while African American, Latino, and Hispanic professionals were concentrated in student affairs. Ideally, faculty and staff members are representative of the student body throughout the entire institution. Learning communities are one way to prime the pipeline and to ensure

that the future pool of faculty include more African American, Latino, and Hispanic applicants.

The possibilities for collaboration among all educators in creating and sustaining learning communities are exciting, and I am grateful that The Washington Center has expanded its reach to include student affairs. Learning communities that are facilitated and supported by both academic faculty and student affairs educators are powerful ways to encourage and increase the success of a broader group of students in all disciplines, including mathematics and science.

### **Reference**

Treisman, U. 1992. "Studying Students Studying Calculus: A Look at the Lives of Minority Mathematics Students in College." *The College Mathematics Journal*, 23(5): 362–372.

*Gwendolyn Jordan Dungy has been Executive Director of NASPA since 1995. She is a national advocate for students and has more than thirty years of experience in higher education.*