

II

Learning Communities In-Depth

St. John Fisher College: Freshman Learning Communities for Student Recruitment and Retention

J. David Arnold

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While many colleges and universities have employed learning communities to address retention, this is a story about implementing learning communities primarily for student recruitment, and only secondarily, initially, for retention. It is also a story about continuous “improvement” of a program each year for five consecutive years to grow from an optional pilot program to a mandatory, comprehensive first-year program.

A regional comprehensive liberal arts college situated on a suburban campus in Rochester, New York, St. John Fisher College had enrollment declines in the mid-1990s just after experiencing enrollment peaks in the early 1990s. An examination of the new student enrollment data strongly supported the conclusion that the college was becoming a two-year rather than a four-year institution. That is, students were taking their first two years at local community colleges and then transferring to Fisher to complete their majors.

After discussions with faculty and students, the newly arrived academic vice president concluded that one of the driving factors behind the decline of freshmen enrolling in the college was an over-thirty-year-old, cafeteria-style general education program that, except for a philosophy/religion distribution requirement, was no different from the generic selection of courses available at any area community college. Thus, there was no compelling curricular reason for students to choose Fisher for four years over a more economical two-plus-two transfer pattern to Fisher after completing two years at a community college.

After discussing the academic vice president’s previous experience with developing learning communities at St. Lawrence University and Clarion University and meeting with external consultants, Fisher faculty decided to implement a pilot program of two, three, or four linked courses in the fall of 1996. This pilot program was modeled after Clarion University’s “Making Connections” learning community program whereby existing general education courses were linked by themes. A skills course, usually writing, was used to forge the link between different disciplines. Faculty were strongly encouraged to coordinate course planning and teaching throughout the semester. First-year student cohort units of eighteen (set by the enrollment limit of the writing courses) were housed in the same residence hall, although not necessarily room-by-room on the same floor. Faculty were also strongly encouraged to develop co-curricular programs and to invite both their learning communities students, and the wider campus as well. Although classes were scheduled so that they could be combined and team-taught for special events, faculty typically taught each section individually. No release time was provided for participating faculty.

The pilot program was so well received by students and faculty (both by word of mouth and by end-of-semester evaluations), that faculty voted to revise the college’s general education requirements to include a mandatory fall semester learning community for every first-time-in-college student effective the very next

fall semester (fall 1997). After this decision was made, faculty and administrators were delighted to learn (later the following fall) that the first-year students who participated in the pilot program were retained at record levels into their sophomore year (86 percent versus 77 percent). Retention rates for subsequent years, although improved over the pre-learning community baseline and above national averages for comparable colleges based on selectivity, have averaged in the low 80s (i.e., results did not replicate or exceed 86 percent of the pilot group). In addition to college retention, students have enrolled and been retained in record numbers in the college residence halls. Before the learning community era, residence halls were undersubscribed, and now halls are oversubscribed (i.e., triples) with 93 percent of freshmen living on campus.

With the advent of full implementation of the learning community program came another development related to student recruitment—the first of three scholarship programs related to students’ placement in a custom-designed learning community for each scholarship cohort group. The first program was the Fisher Service Scholar program. Service scholars were selected for their record of community service prior to enrollment, assigned to a learning community called “Leadership through Self-Development,” and required to perform community service and attend a service seminar for four years to maintain the scholarship. The John Templeton Foundation first recognized this service-learning program as exemplary in 1998. (See www.collegeandcharacter.org and click on “The Templeton Guide” for the contemporary listing of exemplary programs that still includes Fisher.) In addition, Fisher was one of nineteen organizations nationally to receive from President George W. Bush the President’s Community Volunteer Award the Service Scholar Program—the only college or university in the country to receive the award in 2002. (www.sjfc.edu/whatsnew/pr.asp)

Two other scholarship programs tied to learning communities were later developed: the First Generation Scholars in 1999 and the Science Scholars in 2001. Each program annually enrolls up to thirty-six students per program per learning community. Like service scholars, first generation scholars were placed in learning communities with a leadership theme and a community service requirement. Science scholars were taught humanities and college writing through science fiction theme- and problem-based learning tasks over a two-semester sequence of six credit hours per semester.

Based on faculty feedback, a one-credit hour Freshman Seminar was added in 1998 to address adjustment to college issues in a “university 101” type of curriculum. Students met their Freshman Seminar instructor initially during the orientation program and then subsequently met as a group once a week during the first semester. The Freshman Seminar instructor was not an instructor in their learning community and seminar cohorts were different in composition than learning community cohorts.

In 1999, again based on faculty feedback, a Peer Advisor program was added to the Freshman Seminar whereby an upper-class student co-teaches the seminar with the instructor. This innovation has resulted in very positive student evaluations of the seminar experience—results that better fit with the pre-existing pattern of positive student evaluations of the learning community program.

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Finally, starting in 2000, faculty proposed to extend the role of the Freshman Seminar instructor beyond the first semester into a yearlong Freshman Advisor role. Essentially, this change provided greater continuity transitioning the naïve first-year students, through academic advising, to the point of choosing/confirming a major in their sophomore year.

In 2002, The Policy Center on the First Year of College selected Fisher as one of twelve semi-finalists in their national study of Institutions of Excellence in the First College Year in the category of Four-Year Colleges and Universities between 2,000 and 5,000 students. (See www.brevard.edu/fyc and click on “Institutions of Excellence.”) In addition to the Templeton Foundation and the President’s Community Volunteer Award, this citation by the policy center represented further national recognition of learning communities in Fisher’s first-year program.

In sum, the Fisher story is about the continuous construction and renovation of learning communities as the centerpiece of an enrollment management program for traditional first-year college students. The process employed to construct a *signature* curriculum for freshmen has been very intentional, collaborative, and reflective—with faculty, staff, and administrators learning “what works” from assessment and revising program details accordingly each successive year.

The lessons learned in terms of the annual continuous improvement of a learning community program at a private liberal arts college include the following:

- Even when the senior administration of a college fully supports learning communities, as with any curricular initiative, faculty “control” and leadership is essential to sustaining the transition of any pilot program into a universal degree requirement for all students. While the chief academic officer and visiting consultants provided illustrations of various models, the faculty made final curricular decisions.
- Linking pre-existing, required general education courses with a theme for student cohort groups is a very practical and economical model to begin a learning community program. That is, while faculty coordinate their respective courses, no team teaching “in concert” per se is required in the linked course model. This means that faculty loads do not become a cost issue in times of resource constraints with respect to faculty teaching loads.
- Themes for linking courses were varied; nevertheless, diversity and pluralism were the most common themes used in the Fisher learning communities.
- In the tradition of Freshman Interest Groups, characteristics of student cohort groups can be tied to student scholarship programs such that all scholarship recipients are placed in the same custom-designed learning community. Fisher created three scholarship student cohort groups over a five-year period—service scholars, first generation scholars, and science scholars.

- Communication skills courses are an effective means of linking content courses; nevertheless, skills instructors need to be full partners in the planning and coordination of the courses—not merely “in service” of the content courses.
- Faculty development is essential to ensure that once courses are linked thematically, faculty substantively collaborate in the planning and delivery of courses to create more than learning “coincidences” for student-enrolled cohort groups. Some faculty development resources are required to support out-of-the-classroom faculty collaboration both before the learning community term and during it. Linked courses without faculty collaboration are simply block schedules without the intentional learning community benefits for students.
- As a learning community program grows in scope, the initial high quality of faculty instruction and commitment may be difficult to sustain with late-comers or new arrivals to an existing learning community innovation. For example, faculty who were initially skeptical of learning communities may not bring the same passion and commitment as the founding faculty. Also, small colleges with full-time faculty compliments of around 100 or fewer may have to use part-time faculty to complete staffing of a universal learning community program. Thus, even with programmatic success, maintaining initial high quality is a challenge as a program expands and “ages” within an institutional culture at small colleges.
- Assessment data that is timely and relevant can be the basis of faculty-driven, continuous improvement of a learning community program. Fisher employed a simple, collective debriefing with faculty following end-of-semester evaluations to elicit faculty consensus for programmatic change. This closing of the assessment loop ensures, and, for the future, creates a campus ethos that assessment is something that faculty use for *internal* institutional and intrinsic professional needs, rather than for perceived *external* accreditation or accountability requirements.
- With respect to assessment and accountability, new interdisciplinary programs such as learning communities typically face more internal institutional scrutiny than pre-existing departmentally based academic programs.
- Learning Communities can be combined with other First Year Experience curricular tools such as Freshman Seminars and Freshman Advising Programs to create a comprehensive first-year program.

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To reiterate and conclude, learning communities at St. John Fisher were conceptualized initially as a recruitment tool to attract more first-year students and to decrease the dependence on transfer students. As enrollments increased, improved retention of first-year students enrolled in learning communities became as important to Fisher’s enrollment management efforts as recruitment.

In terms of numbers, when the pilot program was implemented in fall 1996, both recruitment and retention were in decline—with an entering class of 293 and

a freshman to sophomore retention rate of 72 percent. By fall 2001, five years into a comprehensive first-year program with learning communities as a foundation, Fisher was enrolling 541 freshmen and had retained 82 percent of the entering fall 2000 class. These numbers reflect an 85 percent increase in the size of the freshmen class and a 10 percent improvement in the first-to second-year student retention rate.

In closing, the Fisher story began with enrollment declines and ends with record freshmen enrollment growth and improvement in first- to second-year retention. While no single factor alone can account for this enrollment turnaround, the figurative and literal concept of “learning community” is now the central answer to the question of “why should students come to Fisher for four years instead of two?”

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St. Lawrence University: Experiential Learning Communities— Dialectics of Ideas and Experience

Grant H. Cornwell and Eve Walsh Stoddard

Save by accident, out-of-school experience is left in its crude and comparatively irreflective state. It is not subject to the refining and expanding influences of the more accurate and comprehensive material of direct instruction. The latter is not motivated and impregnated with a sense of reality by being intermingled with the realities of everyday life. The best type of teaching bears in mind the desirability of effecting this interconnection. It puts the student in the habitual attitude of finding points of contact and mutual bearings. (Dewey, 163)

For well over a decade, faculty and student development staff at St. Lawrence University (SLU) have collaborated to create living/learning communities. In the first year, and throughout the upper-class curriculum, students at SLU have opportunities to pursue their studies in intentional learning communities that build rigorous academic inquiry and personal reflection around experiential architectures, such as the following:

- the First-Year Program where all new students live in residential colleges built around interdisciplinary, team-taught courses
- the Intercultural House where upper-class students can choose to live together in a learning community explicitly devoted to exploring differences and building commonality, while taking a course together, “Introduction to Intercultural Studies”
- the Adirondack Semester where upper-class students can choose to live in a yurt village in the wilderness of the Adirondack Mountains, and study a four-course curriculum around issues of nature, place, and sustainability

All of these endeavors begin with Dewey’s premise that experience educates. They all, however, place experience in dialogue with rigorous academic inquiry, both illuminating the experience and providing existential dimensions to liberal learning. In another essay we call these kinds of living-learning programs “practices of critical integration” (Cornwell and Stoddard, 73). They have in common three elements: lived experience that is bodily, emotional, and intellectual; critical reading and reflection on that experience, and collaborative reflection in a community of learners. In many cases, because of the interdisciplinary and experiential nature of the program or course, the faculty, while retaining their authority as instructors, are also sharing some degree of the learning and reflection.

These kinds of programs are designed to cross the divide between classroom and social life, books, and bodily experiences, to hold personal experiences and values up to critical scrutiny, and to bring practices of lived experience to bear on academic inquiry. In other words, while liberal learning claims to educate the

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whole person, it usually focuses exclusively on one pole of the Cartesian mind-body dualism, the mind. These programs place the polarity in dialectical motion. But equally important, they see the project of education as collaborative and communal. It is not enough to create a dialectic between experience and critical reflection within the isolated individual student. Both experience and reflective analysis are part of a larger collaborative project of discussion and learning. This is not to imply, however, that some kind of consensus is created within the community. On the contrary, it is to create an experience of community that is defined by multiple kinds of difference, one where respectful critique and opposition is fostered.

The First-Year Program

In many ways these programs also arise from specific experiential and socio-historical circumstances within the institution, though many of these circumstances are shared by other colleges and universities. For example, the earliest of these and the most ambitious, the First-Year Program (FYP) was designed in the mid-1980s in response to faculty dissatisfaction with several aspects of campus culture. First and foremost, academic life was perceived as secondary to students' social activities. There was an unhealthy bifurcation between the classroom and the dorm room and the more intellectual students felt marginalized and unhappy. Not only the FYP, but all the living-learning programs that have evolved subsequently are meant in some fashion to address the relationship between social life and formal education. Other problems specific to the inspiration for the FYP included passivity toward learning on the part of students, a composition program that accommodated only half the students and was felt to be inadequate to their needs for writing instruction, lack of integration in student learning, and superficial, mechanical academic advising.

Piloted for about five years and first implemented as a requirement for all incoming students in 1988, the FYP is one of the oldest living/learning programs for first-year students in the country. It brings together faculty and student-life staff in a comprehensive attempt to address the multiple challenges faced by first-year students making the transition to college, but unlike many "freshman experiences" the FYP is extremely challenging academically. The FYP course is a team-taught, interdisciplinary course that emphasizes the development of communication and critical thinking skills. In addition, the students enrolled in each college live together either in a stand-alone residence hall or a wing of a larger building. Each college has either thirty or forty-five students in it, with two or three faculty teaching the course. The course meets for four and one-half contact hours per week (compared to three hours per week for most courses), of which with at least three hours are in the large group and the remainder in "seminar" groups of fifteen, with one faculty member each. Importantly, each seminar leader serves as the academic advisor for the students in that seminar.

The living/learning approach of the FYP enables faculty to accomplish a number of important pedagogical goals. FYP faculty are expected to be able to teach writing and speaking skills, and to help students develop basic research

literacy. Doing this work in a living/learning course creates an effective environment for skills development, including development of collaboration skills, as enhanced through the use of group projects. FYP classrooms often make use of various kinds of student-driven pedagogies that expect students to take responsibility for their own learning. These pedagogies have had two notable benefits. First, students begin to treat similar pedagogies in non-FYP classrooms as an expected part of their learning process; and second, faculty who teach in the FYP bring such pedagogies back to their disciplines. For example, FYP faculty work closely with the University Writing Director, and the work done in the FYP has been the cornerstone of our broader attempts at writing across the curriculum.

The living/learning approach also enhances the university's ability to work with students outside the classroom. Each FYP college has two or three Community Assistants (CAs) assigned to it. The CAs are upper-class students who ensure that university rules and expectations are met, and help students to make connections with other students and various activities across campus. The CAs, along with two full-time professional Residential Coordinators (RCs), guide programmatic efforts in the colleges to help each to function as a residential community. Each FYP college also has a member of the student-life staff associated with it in a liaison capacity. Importantly, the student-life staff and faculty for each college meet on a regular basis to discuss issues of concern both in the classroom and the residence hall, and to ensure that students facing challenges are directed to appropriate resources. These meetings, along with those of the Residential Education Committee (comprised of both faculty and student life staff), provide the key sites of interaction between academic affairs and student life. Faculty and residential staff often work together to create academic activities (e.g., a movie and discussion or course-related oral presentations) that take place in the residence hall. Further, faculty who are informed about students' well-being outside of the classroom make much more effective advisors.¹

Since its inception, the FYP has been evaluated and revised twice. After three years, a major evaluation by external consultants led the faculty to move away from a common core course, and to allow instead each college to have an interdisciplinary topic of interest to the faculty team. This made it easier to attract faculty to the program and it has allowed each college to develop an identity for its students. For example, one might have an international focus and one a womens' studies focus; these themes facilitate the formation of community around common interests among the students. The program now maintains its coherence by a robust set of design guidelines and commonality agreements pertaining to syllabi, communication skills development, and residential goals. More recently, and in response to student criticism that the yearlong course became claustrophobic by the end, the spring semester now offers approximately thirty-five non-residential First-Year Seminars (FYS). These seminars are individually taught and limited to approximately fifteen students. The FYS course continues the work on critical thinking and communication skills from the fall, but shifts the emphasis toward research literacy. The FYS has explicit goals with respect to research skills, with an eye toward equipping students to handle the various kinds of inquiry they will see in their remaining three years.

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One of the most important tasks facing the United States—or any nation—is developing better ways to understand, appreciate, and maximize the potential of cultural diversity.

Evidence of the FYPs effectiveness can be seen in data from the Spring 2000 National Survey of Student Engagement. First-year students at St. Lawrence rank well above national averages in almost every category, and rank above the mean for similar schools in most categories. In particular, SLU students rank above comparable schools with statistical significance at the 99 percent confidence level in areas such as “number of written papers or reports of fewer than twenty pages,” “made a class presentation,” “worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class materials,” “worked with a faculty member on a research project,” and “participated in co-curricular activities.” These data strongly suggest that our combined academic and residential approach to the core of the first year produces students who are more engaged, academically challenged, and involved in the campus than those at other schools.² Internal statistical and anecdotal evidence suggests similar longitudinal improvements since the creation of the FYP. Faculty report increases in the quantity and quality of class participation. We also annually review randomly selected student writing portfolios to assess the range and effectiveness of our communication skills component, and those assessments show demonstrable improvement in writing skills over time.

As noted in the third-year evaluation of the FYP, one of the most significant outcomes of the program has been faculty development, not only in the specifics of pedagogy and interdisciplinary team teaching, but actually in embracing a culture of academic border crossings. Thus, in the years following the implementation of the FYP, faculty and student development staff have collaborated to create a number of upper-class living/learning communities, each addressing specific needs.

The Intercultural House

St. Lawrence is an overwhelmingly white campus in a rural, white area of northern New York. About 6 percent of our students are American persons of color and about 5 percent more are international students. The campus climate has been challenging for many students of color and many white students complained about the lack of diversity. One of the most important tasks facing the United States—or any nation—is developing better ways to understand, appreciate, and maximize the potential of cultural diversity. As a university, we need to prepare all our students with intercultural skills, not just to do well in the world of work after graduation, but to make positive contributions toward achieving social justice. In the long run, SLU needs to recruit and retain more people of color, but for the present we have undertaken to improve the campus climate for diversity and to promote more dialogue across the various boundaries of identity. A grant received from the Hewlett Foundation as part of the Pluralism and Unity project led us to create a living learning program in Intercultural Studies.

The Intercultural House is a living/learning community devoted to engaging faculty and students in the study of cultural diversity and the critical practices that promote it. In 1999, St. Lawrence University renovated an existing residence hall to create an ideal living/learning space for this project. In addition to renovated rooms, there are common spaces designed to foster the kinds of social and intellectual interaction necessary to really make progress with diversity. There

are accommodations for seminars, studying, cooking, and most important, dialogue.

Students who live in The Intercultural House also enroll in a common course, Introduction to Intercultural Studies. This course engages students in an interdisciplinary study of U.S. cultural diversity in a global and comparative context. The course serves as an introductory course in global studies and cultural encounters. In this course, students and faculty work together to examine the complex dimensions of cultural diversity in the United States. By drawing on film, literature, history, and philosophy, the course explores the confluence of social, political, and economic forces which have made the United States the culturally diverse nation that it is, and seeks to develop theories, strategies, and practices that might help communities—local, national, and global—see diversity as a source of potential and strength rather than as a source of problems. Students move from an examination of their own complex identities and social locations to an understanding of how these identities exist in a global matrix of cultural, economic, and political relationships. The course examines how such differentiating categories as gender, race, ethnicity, class, spirituality, and sexuality structure our relations with one another and shape our perceptions of how we are different and what we have in common. In addition, students are asked to study how diversity is defined and functions in this, the St. Lawrence community. As part of the course and part of the residential programming, students develop programs designed to improve the St. Lawrence environment for diversity.

Like the FYP, Intercultural Studies involves collaboration between faculty and student-life staff. The course is team-taught by two or three faculty and the director of multicultural affairs. The team thus includes both academic and student development perspectives at the same time that it includes different racial and gender perspectives on the questions of history and identity that are covered.

The Adirondack Semester

The Adirondack Semester is part of a relatively new minor in Outdoor Studies. The program is modeled on the cultural immersion strategies used in our study abroad programs, but located a short distance from campus in the Adirondacks. Part of its impetus was to turn our fairly remote, rural location into the advantage that it is for those who love being outdoors in a relatively unspoiled environment. SLU has long had a very strong environmental studies department, but outdoor studies is explicitly focused on the relationship between outdoor experiences and critical reflection on them. The program was designed to incorporate skills, experience, and personal values but within an explicitly academic framework. Thus it balances the skills development and personal transformation that can happen on wilderness education programs with the kinds of academic study and critical thinking more commonly found in college classrooms.

Adirondack Semester students immerse themselves full-time in a living/learning community devoted to cultivating sustainable relationships between humans and nature. They live through and reflect critically upon alternative

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strategies for inhabiting the earth, not just as global citizens of the human community, but as interconnected parts of the global ecosystem. The Adirondack Semester begins with a ten-day extended wilderness experience. The main part of the program is based in a sustainable living/learning community without cars, television, or alcohol. One of the most important features of the program is that participants must be willing to commit to an ethos of temporary removal from urban and campus amenities in order to study and reformulate the ethics of their relationships to society and nature. They live in a sustainable yurt village, in the wilderness of the Adirondack Mountains, while taking a full load of four courses. The courses focus on knowing the local place from multiple disciplinary perspectives: history, the arts, ecology, and philosophy. In addition to their course work, students have workshops on skills such as boat building, photography, trail maintenance, museum display, rock climbing, kayaking, canoeing, first aid, and mapping. The outdoor field learning begun on the extended wilderness experience at the beginning of the semester continues with additional excursions during the semester, culminating in a ten-day field trip to another ecosystem at the end of the semester, in the desert Southwest. This last excursion permits additional contrast, comparison, and application of what has been learned up to this point.³

Two recent graduates with training in outdoor studies live in the yurt village full time with the students. The faculty director of the program lives at the yurt village for at least half of each week while the other faculty commute back and forth to campus once a week. Their commute involves a forty-five-minute drive followed by a fifteen-minute kayak or canoe paddle from the road to the program site. This paddle can be quite challenging in rain, snow, or thirty-degree fall temperatures.

In its three years of existence, the program has been tremendously successful in achieving a kind of ethical and cultural transformation in students. This is seen both in what they say about their experience, but more compellingly, in the way their developing values have pushed the program toward more ambitious sustainability goals. The participants themselves spend a great deal of time thinking about and debating the merits of complete separation from the amenities of industrialized life versus creating more moderate reforms on the over-consumptive patterns we tend to follow. The students themselves provide a kind of feedback loop into the design of the program site.

Conclusion

These are just three examples of how living-learning communities at St. Lawrence have evolved to address specific needs that were not being and could not be met within the fragmented and bounded terrain of the traditional academic institutional structure where activity is divided into the academic and the non-academic realms, and the academic realm is subdivided into disciplinary fiefdoms. SLU's learning communities have a very strong commitment to maintaining academic rigor, even raising its standards in these programs, while also incorporating and valuing lived and felt experience. Critical reflection and analysis are placed in dialogue with experience within the discourse community created by a shared living environment to create transformative learning experiences for participants.

Endnotes

1. Parts of this description of the FYP have been adapted from a proposal written by Steve Horwitz, Associate Dean of the First Year (shorwitz@stlawu.edu).
2. Further information on survey data can be obtained from Christine Zimmerman, Director of Institutional Research at St. Lawrence (zimmerman@stlawu.edu).
3. This description is based on the information found on the SLU website: <http://www.stlawu.edu>.

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Wagner College: Learning Communities for the Practical Liberal Arts

Richard Guarasci

The Project

The Wagner Plan is a means of graduating students who are broadly educated and civically engaged reflective practitioners and public leaders.

With 1,750 full-time, traditional-aged, residential students (more than 80 percent), Wagner College is a liberal arts college located in New York City on Staten Island on a hilltop overlooking Manhattan and the New York harbor. With strong academic leadership from its senior officers and faculty, Wagner College launched a comprehensive, four-year curriculum that redesigned the liberal arts and professional education in an attempt to find a contemporary analog for urban liberal education in the twenty-first century.

Working from the tradition of Meiklejohn and Dewey, and the recent reforms at Evergreen, LaGuardia, and others, the “Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts” joins deepened integrated learning with experiential education. The Wagner Plan is a means of graduating students who are broadly educated and civically engaged reflective practitioners and public leaders.

Contemporary urban liberal education must prepare undergraduates for a life in the professions as well as for a personal and civic life within a pluralist urban community. Nothing less will prepare them to successfully build rewarding careers and lives that nurture personal achievements, cultural nourishment, and civic commitments. Success will likely require the traditional liberal arts goals of critical inquiry, openness to discovery with an appreciation for complexity, ambiguity, and nuance. But they will need more. They will require a “democratic sensibility” for cultural diversity. They will need very specific competencies in oral, written, technical, visual, and cross-cultural communication; and most important, they must be skilled at integrating knowledge and responding to real-world unscripted problems.

“The Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts: Reading, Writing and Doing” provided a curricular architecture for providing our students with a greater probability for realizing these ends. In 1998, the faculty and administration implemented a comprehensive plan that called for a reorganization of the undergraduate program, seeking a curricular program that would be more compelling and coherent, one that would become an educational signature for liberal education at Wagner College. The plan’s architects envisioned a reconciliation of a number of domains: community and classroom; liberal arts and professional education; and, the college and its urban setting. In the past, all of these were possible in conversation and experience, but now the college sought an intentional and comprehensive integration, resulting in a contemporary urban dialogue that would lead to deep and purposeful learning accompanied by habits of responsible civic engagement.

The plan relies on required learning communities coupled with experiential and community-based learning, intercultural education, and writing, research, and computer competencies. Academic advisement and co-curricular learning are important cognates with the plan. Faculty plan the learning communities as a group, but few courses are team-taught. Monthly meetings of learning community

faculty—which comprise nearly all Wagner faculty—provide opportunities for regular program review and continued faculty development. A two-day learning community retreat closes out the academic year. Dean Anne Love reports that “learning communities help students who come in with a profession in mind see the purpose of the liberal arts courses because they see courses, such as economics, in an integrated way, not just in a vacuum. Undecided students gain a much larger sense of the possibilities available across majors. For faculty, it has been tremendous, a real breaching of the walls and silos of the campus. They’ve come to know many other colleagues across departments and gained so much from teaching-focused collegial interactions.”

These elements are organized around a First-Year Program, Intermediate/Sophomore Program, and a Senior Program accompanied by traditional liberal arts breadth requirements and conventional majors. Students complete thirty-six units. Faculty members normally teach seven courses per year and more than 90 percent teach in learning communities (LCs) and approximately 60 percent teach in LCs with tutorials that emphasize reflective practice, experiential learning, and persuasive writing and speaking skills. Wagner College gives its students the unique opportunity of linking LCs to experiential learning. By virtue of our location in New York City, Wagner College is able to involve more students in the social, scientific, and professional domains of one of the premier cities of the nation.

The Wagner Plan links the LCs directly to field experience based on the theme of the LC. Students typically spend three hours per week at the designated site observing the organization, its practices, and its dynamics. We link the field placements carefully to one of the three LC courses, which is called a Reflective Tutorial (RFT). Faculty in each LC divide the students into smaller groups for the RFT, with each faculty member serving as the professor for one of the RFT groups. The faculty member who teaches the RFT will also be the first-year faculty advisor to all students in the RFT. The tutorial emphasizes writing skills, and students link their field experiences directly to the course readings in the RFT and LC course. Because the field experiences are directly linked to academic coursework, students learn how to scrutinize ideas in the light of real-world experiences.

One example is the First-Year Program’s Learning Community entitled “Living on Spaceship Earth.” This LC combines introductory courses in environmental biology and microeconomics around the theme of environmental concerns. Approximately twenty-four enroll in this LC and the economics and biology professors also serve as the first-year faculty advisors to these students.

The RFT component focuses on more environmental readings that further integrate the two subject areas. The two professors each teach one section of the RFT to approximately twelve students each. In addition, the RFT requires the first significant college research paper for these students. By employing a “writing across the curriculum” model in the First-Year Program, the two instructors (trained in an ongoing faculty development writing workshop in the FYP) require a sequence of writing events culminating in the second draft of a research paper.

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The focus of this research relies on the third component of the RFT—more than thirty hours of community field work in Tom’s River, New Jersey, where students explore the incidence of elevated rates of adolescent and childhood cancers that some suspect is related to ground-water pollution and prior industrial landfill issues. Students work with local environmental groups, parents’ associations, political and governmental offices, and corporate organizations in wading through the intricacies of this serious and vexing issue.

Initially, they are asked to employ their classroom texts in deciding how to think like a scientist and an environmental policy expert in assessing the relationships in landfill pollution carcinogens and cancers, and to assemble the relevant information appropriate for a scientific analysis. Secondly, they are asked to think like a social scientist and policymaker in assessing the social, economic, and political impacts of the cancer issue within the Tom’s River community. Student research papers, websites, and poster sessions are derived from, shared with, and discussed with community, political, and press representatives at the end of the term.

The FYP contains an additional twenty-one other LC clusters built on different themes, but in the same pedagogical model. The common goals are designed by an FYP faculty of forty-two full-time members and several other academic administrators in the writing center, library, and student affairs. Some examples of other LC clusters include the integration of canonical western literature and world history courses centered on the theme of “The City and Civilization.” This LC focuses on ancient Athens, Rome, Renaissance Florence, nineteenth-century Vienna, and contemporary New York City, with students involved in local architectural, museum, neighborhood, and cultural organizations assessing the similarities of urban life across time. Other examples combine politics and literature around the themes of diversity and democracy; politics and markets; computer science and the literature of science fiction; healthcare, nursing, and chemistry; education and the psychology of gender; and many other combinations from the entire undergraduate curriculum. Every department on campus participates in the FYP LC program, which is supported by an office of experiential learning in field and community placements directly related to the course syllabi and with a tight partnership with the faculty members involved. Both course and field assessment protocols are essential for the program’s success.

Intermediate Learning Community (ILC)

During the second and third years of The Wagner Plan, students select an intermediate learning community in addition to completing many of the course distribution requirements of the curriculum. Embarking on a major area of study, while at the same time accumulating a breadth of knowledge in diverse subject areas, students begin to see in significant ways the connections between disciplines. The intermediate learning community serves as an anchor for this coursework, combining two courses in different fields. In leading to the senior learning community, this course work prepares students for a greater understanding of their chosen discipline.

Some illustrations include a very popular ILC combining sociology and advertising, archeology and biology, music literature and jazz, history and economics, and education and mathematics courses. A myriad of combinations exist in the intermediate program, which is required of all students and normally completed in the sophomore year.

The Senior Program

The Wagner Plan culminates in the final year with The Senior Program and the third Learning Community. As the ultimate goal of The Senior Program, all students bring together the breadth of a liberal education and the depth of specialized knowledge into a real-world applied practice.

Within the major, the Senior Learning Community consists of two classes. The first is a substantive course, which explores issues within the field of study. This capstone course is crucial to a final understanding of the major. Added to this in-depth study is a field-based internship or applied learning component such as a significant original research project. In this way, students put into practice advanced principles of their major.

Wagner goes even further, however, to combine fieldwork with a course in which all students within the major come together to discuss and reflect upon their experiences. We think this added component, the Reflective Tutorial, is the key. Through discussion of a wide variety of experiences or the sharing of findings and research techniques, students gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. And they develop a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity and depth of their major through this intensive fieldwork, problem solving, and critique. For all students, this is the capstone experience, the culmination of their learning, and both the continuation of their first three years at Wagner and the beginning of their experiences beyond the college.

The Senior Program brings together the fundamental tenets of The Wagner Plan. Challenging coursework in a broad curriculum infuses the study of the major field with more significance. “Learning by doing” allows students to not only learn, but put this knowledge into practice in important field experiences. The Wagner Plan is designed to be transformative, to lead students not only to a greater understanding of what they are learning, but to an understanding of how they will take this knowledge and affect the world around them.

Some illustrations of the Senior Program are in business, psychology, and English. In business, all seniors complete an LC in the major by enrolling in a capstone course integrating their previous coursework in management, finance, marketing, and accounting within a case based strategic policy course. The accompanying RFT requires more than 100 hours of practicum placed in a project or non-profit organization, usually in Manhattan. Finally, all business seniors complete a senior paper/thesis integrating their field placement with the themes of the capstone course.

In psychology, all majors complete a senior LC involving a “History of Psychology” course and an RFT with 100 hours of fieldwork in either clinical practice with one of the trial institutions or a field-based research internship.

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Again, all seniors complete a service paper/thesis integrating the capstone course themes and the field component.

In English, all majors complete a senior LC with a capstone senior course joining specific literary genres with schools of literary analysis. They may choose one of four field options of more than 100 hours in journalism, creative writing, public relations, or E-based writing.

All departments and majors follow this senior program protocol. In the sciences, experimentation requires additional time, so the RFT follows in the spring semester where research work is written up at a publishable quality and presented as senior papers exemplifying the application of their scientific training.

Conclusion

The impact of The Wagner Plan on the college is quite substantial as measured by outside assessment, such as our ten-year accreditation, as well as quantitative data on admissions, student retention, and faculty hiring. In many ways The Wagner Plan provides a dramatic conjunction between the liberal arts and professional education.

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Marymount College Tarrytown: Learning Communities for Curriculum Development

Roberta S. Matthews

Small liberal arts colleges with limited resources face any number of daunting challenges. Overwhelmed by deferred maintenance, the escalating costs of technology, and, often, a small faculty, they struggle within their often limited resources to meet student needs, provide a high quality education, and prepare graduates for an ever-changing world of work in an increasingly global economy. Often church-affiliated, issues of social justice associated with leading an ethical and moral life permeate the campus. Struggling to survive and grow, these institutions are constantly engaged in the process of sorting out the relationship between their past and their future, and of redefining themselves within the broad directions of higher education in terms of their special and quite particular niche. For many, change and growth depend on how well they understand and take advantage of the art of the possible.

In this context, learning communities offer an opportunity to use limited resources in new and creative ways. The genesis of the “Latina Literature and Oral History of the Latino Community of Sleepy Hollow” pair at Marymount College, Tarrytown, New York, is presented here as a case study in why learning communities are as important to small, private campuses as they are to large, public campuses. This pairing suggests how. By identifying and developing a variety of local resources, small colleges may reconfigure resources they already have to serve new and different goals and use learning communities to address important local issues in a low-cost manner. The genesis of this learning community underscores the potential of learning communities to facilitate the intellectual boundary-crossing of faculty and curriculum that we must all engage in to change and thrive in increasingly complex and interrelated environments.

During the 1995–96 academic year, a group of four Latina students and other members of the Latinas Unidas club petitioned the vice president for academic affairs for a Latino course. She shared the request with the faculty. Silence. In 1996–97, the new vice president again asked faculty to create a course that would address the content requested. Again, no response. Why was a generally dedicated, involved and committed faculty, accustomed to working closely with students suddenly turning a deaf ear to their constituency? The reasons were simple: there had been little turnover in the faculty; there were limited resources. Among the full-time faculty, none had the expertise to address this new curriculum area or create such a course.

The vice president met with the four students who had orchestrated the petition, and asked them if they might be interested in creating a course with a faculty member. A bit apprehensive but willing, they agreed. The vice president turned to Roger Panetta, a professor of American history and a well-respected local historian of the Hudson Valley. He thought his old friend and colleague, Joe Servodidio, professor of Spanish language and literature, might be willing to sign on. Joe, in turn, agreed to work with the students. Although several had been in

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his classes, Joe had a hard time making contact with the group, which had mixed feelings about embarking on this grand adventure.

Finally, they began working with the students, collecting syllabuses from other colleges, and narrowing their course to Latina Literature, a logical focus for a course at a women's college. Joe felt it was important "to let students feel they were going to have some real input organizing this—academics are very jealous of the field of expertise and once they are known as experts, the specialty is all-important. This experience puts that idea in perspective. Here, I'm learning from the students and hopefully they are learning from me. There's a lot more learning going on than usual." Together, Joe and his students created the entire course—choosing the novels, laying the ground rules for receiving advanced language credit, as well as literature and history credit, and contacting program facilitators to arrange for general education credit. Since the pair was launched during a time of transition from one general education program to another, care was taken to ensure that the courses in the pair fulfilled both old and new general education requirements.

In the meantime, Roger, planning his own course for the spring, became more and more intrigued with the possibility of linking the two courses by focusing the oral history course on the local Latino community. Then, both faculty members were willing to commit themselves to teaching in areas related to but clearly outside the expertise of their disciplines. Indeed, Roger introduced himself the first day of class by telling the students the kinds of knowledge and experience he could bring to the class (his expertise is oral history) and what he could not (Latino culture and history). One student, recalling this moment noted, "I was astonished that a professor had the heart and the courage to stand up in front of the class and say those things. We were all surprised and impressed."

The next challenge was to convince students, already stretched by the experience of planning a course, that they wanted to take a learning community that paired a literature course with an oral history course. Even though these students were pioneers, a group who had had the guts to petition their college for a learning experience that did not exist, they entered into the venture of pairing courses with mixed emotions.

The turning point finally came when Roger and Joe handed the students a draft of a recruitment brochure for the pair that the two of them had put together and told the students to make any changes, and to make sure it was printed and distributed on time for registration for spring 1998 classes. The lesson, as Roger suggested, was simple:

We tend to think of [learning communities] in terms of issues about faculty having to learn new ways and collaborative models. We underestimate the students' anxiety, and the ways in which they are as much creatures of the traditional curriculum as we are . . . We are asking them to make a commitment to two courses, a brand new life experience . . . We should not underestimate their anxiety and [figure out how] to smooth the way . . . and make them more relaxed about it.

Thus, a group of students who had felt invisible in the college curriculum, worked with faculty to create a learning community that not only spoke to their needs, but simultaneously involved them in the process of working with local citizens, whose ancestry and background resembled theirs, and who were also invisible in their community:

The Latino community in Tarrytown has about 2,400 Latinos out of a population of 8,500. They've been there since the early '60s. First Cubans, then Puerto Ricans . . . more recently Ecuadorians, Guatemalans, Colombians, Dominicans . . . We argued that this invisible community be made visible by going in and digging out its oral history . . . There's no written record. We talked about this community not having a voice, and how we were going to give them a voice.

To contact the local Latino community, the professors and their students depended on a local resource intimately linked with the college. The Life Center, in Tarrytown, was founded by the Religious [order] of the Sacred Heart of Mary, the same order that founded the college. The center offers social service programs addressing local needs such as adult literacy education and day care. Marymount students fulfill a service learning requirement there and some faculty volunteer at the center. The class made contact with possible oral history "narrators" through the center. Early in the semester, the entire Latina learning community attended a Life Center dinner to meet people and to develop their collection of "narrator cards" from which they would choose people to interview.

During the end of the fall semester, Joe and Roger had been frantically putting together separate courses so they could work together. As they taught the courses for the first time in the spring semester, it became clear that they had created parallel courses, instead of two courses linked by a common theme that worked together exploring that theme. Although Joe and Roger spoke frequently, they were unable to attend each other's classes with any regularity because of other teaching obligations. Their understanding of what they had wrought evolved during the semester as they were teaching their courses.

The degree to which the courses were naturally integrated did not really occur to them until they were in the thick of it. The Latina authors, as Joe points out "come from the same experiences that our students are coming from . . . many of the themes we are dealing with in our course are related to the things they are going to be seeing in their interview: biculturalism, bilingualism, the difficulty of living in two worlds, going home, crossing borders." As Roger experienced the course, it became clear that it would have been extremely difficult for him to help students create questionnaires without the enrichment of the literature course. "I could not have done this if we were not paired, because it would have left the whole definition of the question undone. There's no way I could have found that." On the other hand, because he did not realize the degree to which themes emerging from the literature course would facilitate the creation of the oral history questionnaires, he duplicated a lot of work in the beginning by assigning "unnecessary readings." The literary material suggested and engaged with the key themes of cultural identity. In hindsight, these could have provided

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the basis for the oral history questionnaire. Some of the history-sociology readings could have been eliminated in favor of more time in the field.

A common misconception is that an inevitable consequence of teaching in a learning community is the sacrifice of content; actually, the opposite is true. Roger subsequently eliminated duplicative readings, and increased the coverage and time for the actual fieldwork, because he knew he could assume that students would gain cultural and sociological understandings from the literature course.

This learning community evolved from a swirl of diversities. Two middle-aged, male, Italo-American professors were working with twenty-seven primarily traditional-age female college students, twenty-two of whom were first- and second-generation Latina-American students (with roots in Colombia, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Puerto Rico). The five non-Latina students were whites and blacks of varying backgrounds (one had immigrated from Guyana with her family when she was ten). The most active participant, was an African-American student. As Roger points out, the content of the two courses underscored class differences as well:

Basically [the students] are a middle-class group. I think it's good for them to see people struggling to learn English. As an outsider, I am absolutely astounded by the ease with which [our students] move between the two languages. I'm very impressed by that. But . . . I also think it is good for them to see people of the same ethnic group struggling . . . at an earlier point, trying to get a foothold, doubling up in apartments because they cannot pay the rent . . . it's a good experience of another side of life.

With Joe, the class read six novels by Latina writers from six different countries, chosen by the team of four students with whom he had worked earlier. As it has for Joe, the experience has underscored for Roger the reciprocity of learning. He feels strongly that the students need “to see that there are pieces here I don't know. My expertise is knowing how to put these questionnaires together . . . and training them to do interviews. But when we start talking about the ins and outs of Latino culture, I need to depend on them. The challenge . . . is getting out of my skin in terms of race and gender to adapt my skills to a different set of needs.”

The students made contact with and interviewed their “narrators”—a varied group of Latinos from as many different backgrounds as the students themselves. Some of the narrators had lived in the United States for thirty years, some were recent immigrants, some were legal, some not, some were English-speaking, some not. The faculty dealt with the issue of integrating the non-Latinas into the class by pairing off all students for the interviews and making sure that each member of the pair got to conduct an interview either in Spanish or English. In addition, the teams were set up so that one student was the technical expert and the “ethnographic” eye while the other conducted the interviews, so they further depended on each other to accomplish their goal.

Out of this diversity came a remarkable unity of purpose and spirit. Asked why she took the course, a non-Latina student noted: “I took the [learning

community] because I was interested in Latino culture but also to support the students who initiated it. It took two years to get this course.” Among the most satisfying aspects of the experience for her were:

That the courses are paired and we are working together as a group—the class really respects one another—including the professors but also [that we are] learning on our own what we need to do and getting out in the community and initiating these interviews; the challenge of talking to people some of whom are illegal aliens has provoked me to think about what it is to talk to people from different generations, cultures, economic backgrounds . . . you need to put yourself in their shoes and their situations.

The impact on the Latina students was as strong, raising the question of how to define “Latino” identity. This is an issue throughout the United States, and one that was debated in class. As one Latina student pointed out: “I thought I knew a lot . . . but [my] cultural identity really changed. I realized I had more in common with my Latino brothers and sisters from different countries than I had thought before. That really changed me as a person and who I thought I was.”

The academic richness of the learning community was matched by an equally rich local community experience. The Latina students, who had had to struggle to have their learning needs acknowledged and met, were surprised that the Sleepy Hollow community, if they thought about Marymount at all, characterized it as the college for rich girls on the hill who had everything they wanted and dismissed the college as having nothing to do with their lives. Especially for these students, who move between two cultures with relative ease, the struggles of the local community made a strong impression:

Now I feel more connected to people I thought I had nothing in common with. I learned to respect people for all the things they go through. Alicia [her narrator] was a single mother. It’s very hard for someone to come to this country, learn the language, be illegal, and somehow make it with two children—and she did, so I am very proud of her. I realized I have to cherish what I have and it gave me a sense of humility towards my life and what I have to do in the future . . . We put up our own barriers and we have to overcome them. I learned from Alicia that I need to give back to the community.

The course culminated in two related activities which reflected the most powerful learning experiences. In class, each team presented its findings, relating the literature to the interviews they had conducted in the community. Students described this experience as “amazing,” an opportunity for them to connect the parallel streams of the courses and to step back and realize what they as a team and as an entire class had managed to accomplish.

Propelled by the sense that the interviews had enabled them to establish unique and special relationships with the Latino community in Sleepy Hollow, “now I feel I have a good friend in Sleepy Hollow,” the students embarked on their second culminating activity. One student belonged to a group of Andean

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The students felt a deep sense of gratitude to their professors “for believing in us.” They had had the academic experience they craved and it had been a springboard to other significant experiences as well. They had succeeded beyond their wildest dreams . . .

musicians and dancers, and the class decided to invite their narrators and families for a festival evening of a Latino dinner and a performance by “Tahuantinsuyo.” Finding funding to pay the performers, figuring out how to use their meal cards to help underwrite the cost of the dinner, involving the catering service in the set-ups, service, and clean-up, arranging for coverage in local papers, the students “learned to work not only in the academic but in the business sense. It was a lot of work . . . but in the end, it was all worth it.” As one of the students pointed out, “We showed everyone that we were a serious class, that we had learned a lot, and then brought everybody together for an evening of food and music and dance.” The students had cooked wonderful food for the buffet dinner and the college theater was packed for the performance.

By the end of the semester, three articles had been written about various aspects of the Latina learning community in both local papers and the Westchester section of the *New York Times*. The students felt a deep sense of gratitude to their professors “for believing in us.” They had had the academic experience they craved and it had been a springboard to other significant experiences as well. They had succeeded beyond their wildest dreams and, in the process, laid the groundwork for an archive of local history to be developed at the college.

The learning community transformed the two faculty as well. Friends for almost thirty years, they realized early in the semester, after a visit to Museo del Barrio with their students, that they had rarely had “a common intellectual outing together . . . it is almost as if our work lives conspire against it, and then this [learning community] comes along that throws you back into the relationship and makes it purposeful, makes it part of your job, [and] creates the context to do it.” Roger articulated “a sense of collegueship that is invigorating,” and that had a direct impact on his relationship with the class. “When I come from another class before this one, I’m not going to a different subject, I’m going to another world, and it feels great.” For both, “It’s really been a wonderful surprise . . . it’s renewed our friendship . . . that’s . . . a surprising hidden agenda that we have to think about, especially in a small college where we value these things.” To Joe and Roger, it was an opportunity to reconnect and bond with a colleague as an intellectual.

There are significant professional lessons as well, ones that have important implications for small colleges with limited resources who cannot hire new faculty to provide students with the kinds of courses they wish to take and academic experiences they value.

As one faculty member put it:

As a faculty we have been selling ourselves short. We are so blinded by the boundaries of specialization, we miss the way in which our skills are transferable, even though we are constantly telling students that. This experience is a . . . revival of my own spirit and redefinition of myself as a teacher . . . I have skills that can be renewed and rejuvenated and used in new ways.

The various levels and kinds of “payback” from what might be considered a modest and simple learning community model validates the “small college” approach to learning communities, where the population (of both faculty and students) might not support models that require large numbers of students on the one hand, or a larger number of courses on the other hand.

The learning community was launched amid great skepticism about student willingness to enroll in two courses simultaneously, in response to student needs, by experienced professors who were willing to take risks and to work with students as colleagues. As the model evolved, it included rich thematic linkages between two courses, outreach into the immediate community, a final dinner and performance by a professional music and dance troupe for the college and the community, and publicity that any college would welcome. For the students and faculty who worked hard to make it happen, the learning community was a transformative experience, the kind of adventure, fun, and challenge that defines good education in any context.