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Learning Community Snapshots

The Evergreen State College: Creating an Institutional Context for Learning Communities

Barbara Leigh Smith

The Evergreen State College is an innovative public liberal arts college located in Olympia, Washington. Established in 1971, Evergreen's current enrollment is approximately 4,000 FTE. The college is predominantly undergraduate, but also offers small master's level programs in teaching, environmental studies, and public administration, which are also organized as integrated learning communities. Evergreen's founders drew their inspiration from the work of Alexander Meiklejohn and Joseph Tussman. After reading Tussman's *Experiment at Berkeley*, the Evergreen founders decided to build the institution around thematic, team-taught yearlong programs rather than disciplinary courses. The college aims to produce liberally educated graduates who are intentional and responsible learners, skilled at working with others, and comfortable in a multicultural and rapidly changing world. The college is committed to team teaching and interdisciplinary education, believing that it best prepares students for the complex issues facing our society.

Evergreen has a long-standing interest in working with people from underrepresented populations on the Olympia campus and in select communities. Community-based education is a core value. The college has a small campus in the low-income, ethnically diverse Hilltop area of Tacoma, and runs a B.A. program on five Indian Reservations in western Washington. These programs involve deep partnerships with two local community colleges (Tacoma Community College and Northwest Indian College) where a colocated, seamless curriculum ensures that students move from one institution to the next and graduate.

Evergreen is also noted for its five distinctive public services centers: the Labor Education and Research Center, the Evergreen Center for Educational Improvement (K-12), the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, the Northwest Indian Applied Research Institute, and the Longhouse Education and Cultural Center. The Washington Center is the home of the National Learning Communities Project. Evergreen's public service centers have been key in reaching out to specific communities and broadly disseminating proven Evergreen educational approaches to the wider world. They have also been important in countering the tendency among innovative colleges to become insular.

At its founding, Evergreen was coherently structured to support interdisciplinary collaborative teaching and learning. To promote collaboration, the college operates without faculty rank, employs a uniform faculty pay scale, and uses narrative evaluations of student work instead of grades. The college describes its educational philosophy in terms of the following principles, which guide its policies and practices:

1. Interdisciplinary Study.
2. Personal Engagement in Learning and Active Learning.
3. Linking Theoretical Perspectives with Practice.
4. Collaborative/Cooperative Work.
5. Teaching and Learning Across Significant Differences.

Learning communities have proven to be an adaptable structure over time as the college has grown and reached out to new types of students. Most Evergreen learning community programs, known as coordinated studies programs, are interdisciplinary, team-taught and yearlong, but ten-credit learning communities are now offered as well, to accommodate the growing number of part-time students. In both modes, the faculty and students typically work in only one coordinated studies program at a time. This approach promotes deep engagement on the part of both students and faculty and allows sufficient time and space to explore substantial interdisciplinary themes and questions. Undergraduate research projects, service-learning, fieldwork, seminars, and various forms of active learning are commonly employed. Reflective practice and student responsibility is encouraged through various practices including student involvement in decision-making and such practices as student self-evaluations, which are part of the Evergreen transcript.

Freshmen typically choose among more than a dozen team-taught, yearlong learning community programs with such titles as “Paradox of Progress,” “Political Ecology,” “Problems Without Solution?,” “The Good Life,” and “Great Books.” More advanced students also engage in yearlong full-time programs organized around interdisciplinary areas of specialization through programs such as “Molecule to Organism,” “Data to Information,” “Science of Mind,” “Political Economy and Social Change,” “Ecological Agriculture,” and “Mediaworks.”

Evergreen has received national recognition as an innovative undergraduate institution. Most recently, the Association of American Colleges and Universities chose Evergreen as one of twenty *Greater Expectations* leadership institutions that are revitalizing undergraduate education. Numerous studies by Alexander Astin (*What Matters in College?*, Jossey-Bass, 1993) and George Kuh and others (*Involving Colleges*, Jossey-Bass, 1991) attest to the college’s effectiveness in terms of student learning. In 2002, the National Survey of Student Engagement ranked Evergreen highly in comparison with similar institutions, on the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, and supportive campus environment. Evergreen has been particularly successful in graduating students of color.

Learning communities have been synonymous with The Evergreen State College since its inception. They have been sustained by a congruent culture and organizational structure, careful hiring of new faculty, and ongoing faculty development. The continuous re-invention of the curriculum has also been important in keeping the teaching and learning environment fresh and responsive to new ideas.

For further information contact the Provost’s Office, The Evergreen State College, Olympia, Washington 98505.

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Augsburg College: An Integrated First Semester Experience

Frankie Shackelford

Augsburg College is a small, primarily residential liberal arts college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, located in the heart of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Led by Dr. William Frame, the college provides educational opportunities that transform theory into action and unite the liberal arts with experiential learning. Although founded as a seminary by Norwegian immigrants, Augsburg's contemporary mission is "to nurture future leaders of service to the world" by supporting and challenging students as they discern and prepare for a theologically-grounded vocation in a global society. With its inner-city location, Augsburg provided leadership for founding the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA) now in its third decade of providing problem-based metropolitan and study-abroad programs. Always attuned to the needs of the local neighborhoods, Augsburg is a recognized national leader in service-learning and has been named a model "Engaged Campus" by the Minnesota Campus Compact. Curricular learning communities foster synergy between the long-standing mission of education for service and the increasing attention to education for citizenship.

All first-year students choose a learning community cluster in their first semester at the college. These consist of course pairs or triads, anchored by the Augsburg Seminar, a mandatory, student-success seminar launched in the fall of 1998. A team of one or two professors, a staff resource person, and a student orientation leader leads the seminars, which have been designed to achieve three student learning goals: (1) to make a successful transition to being a college student; (2) to become part of the larger Augsburg learning community; and (3) to become a responsible, reflective learner. An institutional goal is to retain these students to second semester and ultimately to degree completion. Retention rates over the first five years average 91 percent from fall to spring. Of greater importance is the opportunity learning communities provide to convey the values of vocation, cross-disciplinary dialogue, collaborative practice, and community-based learning.

In addition to readings and presentations on the college mission with its grounding in the liberal arts and Christian vocation, the Augsburg Seminars provide practical bibliographic and IT tutorials and class sessions on respecting diversity, healthy living, and academic advising. Outside the classroom, students complete a "passport" of community activities, including five events on campus and five events or experiences in the surrounding urban areas. Students are encouraged to complete their passport activities with other members of their "AugSem" and are then assigned to write reflections on these co-curricular or other academic experiences, such as all-campus convocations, relating them to their own personal development and to the content of their linked courses. The linked courses offer a setting in which to apply academic strategies modeled in seminars and to connect field trips or community-service projects to disciplinary learning. In turn, the Augsburg Seminars give instructors of paired courses a shared forum for exploring the common ground between their content areas.

In 2001, with the help of an “Engaging Communities and Campuses” grant from the CAPHE unit of the Council of Independent Colleges, six of the eighteen first-year learning communities were redesigned around ongoing partnerships with local schools and community organizations, such as “Project for Pride in Living.” For example, one AugSem cohort, which was also enrolled in a linked course in computer science, worked in an elementary school to help teach computer skills to low-income students and their parents. Music students assisted with various dimensions of concert organization at the nearby Cedar Cultural Center. This model of civic engagement was expanded to twelve cohorts in the fall of 2002 and will continue to grow as new partnerships are cultivated. Key to the success of the community-based learning is the tandem planning by instructors and community partners and the careful selection of tasks that support the learning goals.

The first-year learning communities are a work in progress. Over the five years of program development, there has been an evolution from mostly dyads toward the ideal of having every Augsburg Seminar linked with two courses. The learning community structure has inspired additional connected courses in the newly adopted General Education curriculum. Assessment surveys show that more than 80 percent of students find the AugSem experience helpful in making a successful transition to college and becoming integrated into the campus community—the primary goals. “Linkage to other courses” is one of four features repeatedly deemed most useful in student survey responses. Nevertheless, only half of the students feel that the third learning goal, that of becoming reflective learners, is being achieved. This has prompted new conversations among AugSem instructors concerning student motivation, expectations for written reflection, and the advising process. A grant from the Bush Foundation has encouraged instructors of paired courses to integrate their content more systematically, in order to make the learning connected and meaningful. Faculty training, co-facilitated by the AugSem co-ordinator and the director of student orientation, has increased teachers’ awareness of student development issues, as well as prompted pedagogical innovation. The linked-course model is economically feasible, facilitates the registration process for incoming students, aids retention, and gives a coherence to learning not found in the random array of courses first-year students typically choose. The “Learning Communities Curriculum Planning Summer Workshop,” held on the Augsburg campus in June 2002 and co-sponsored by the National Learning Communities Project, helped teams from nine states envision and plan for curricular innovation.

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students complete a “passport”
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Stonehill College: A Four-Year Program to Create A Campus Community of Learners

Susan Mooney

Stonehill is phasing in a new general education program that reaches across the four years of a student's undergraduate experience and includes learning communities as a key element.

Stonehill College is a residential, Catholic, undergraduate liberal arts college located in Easton, Massachusetts. Stonehill has 2,100 students. Stonehill is phasing in a new general education program that reaches across the four years of a student's undergraduate experience and includes learning communities as a key element. Finding that students rarely connected the disparate components of their education, the integration of knowledge is a key theme of the new Cornerstone Program of General Education.

First-year core courses enroll common cohorts of students in one pair of courses each semester (literature with history and religious studies with philosophy). A fall seminar designed to encourage students to partake of on- and off-campus cultural offerings is also required. The second year, each student enrolls in a fully-developed learning community, defined below. The third year focuses on moral reasoning about life and career, while the fourth year capstone seminar leads students to integrate general education knowledge with that of the major discipline. (In addition, there are language, science, and statistics requirements that may be taken any year.) Truly, the goal is to create a campus-wide community of learners by helping students to accept the responsibility for becoming educated, thoughtful persons, rather than merely surviving college.

Our sophomore learning communities are structured as two classes from different disciplines combined with a third integrative seminar class. Two faculty design and teach the three-course combination, and all students are enrolled in all three courses. Each learning community addresses one or more complex issues or problems that are best understood through a multidisciplinary perspective. Learning communities in 2002–03 include those addressing questions of eugenics (using statistics and history of science), spirituality (using studio arts and religious studies), gender (using political science and literature), and child rearing/schooling (using psychology and education).

The learning community seminar requirements are minimal—students must be actively engaged in integrating the knowledge from the two disciplinary courses—to give the faculty maximal opportunity for creative teaching. For 2002–03, there are seminars that serve as laboratories for solving complex problems, stages for performance of musical theatre, service-learning opportunities to work with girls in the local middle schools, and many other variations.

Early-on Stonehill made a decision to invest carefully in planning and college-wide discussion of the concept of learning communities and general education to ensure that this effort did not fail, as had several previous reform efforts. Both external and on-campus venues were used as arenas for discussion. Stonehill teams went to the Association of American Colleges and Universities Asheville Institute on General Education and the National Learning Communities Project Institute at The Evergreen State College. Given widespread faculty concern over students' compartmentalization of knowledge, the notion of requiring all students to enroll in one learning community was not controversial. Four campus-wide sessions on how to design learning communities were very well

attended, with about three-quarters of the full-time faculty participating. Many of the learning communities created on paper at those sessions have blossomed into reality, often resulting from faculty who had no plan to work together prior to the workshop. Even some skeptics who attended found themselves excited about the draft learning community they created with a randomly chosen colleague from another discipline!

During the 2002–03 academic year, forty-two of Stonehill’s 121 full-time faculty (and three part-time faculty) were offering sophomore learning communities, and there was widespread enthusiasm for the approach. Some of those teaching the first-year core courses are taking advantage of the common cohort of students there to incorporate more learning community pedagogy into that curriculum. Risk-seeking faculty who labored under a structure that restricted interdisciplinary team teaching are thrilled to have the freedom to work together, while even the more reserved faculty are intrigued by the benefits for student learning and faculty collaboration such communities provide. Expected benefits to students, already being confirmed by faculty who taught fall 2003 learning communities, include enhanced quantity and quality of participation, deeper understanding of both disciplinary content and interdisciplinary connections, and stronger development of leadership and collaboration skills. Benefits reported by faculty include learning different teaching styles, strategies, and disciplinary approaches from close work with a faculty colleague, especially in the integrative LC seminar. Faculty also report appreciating the opportunity to engage students in experiential and/or community-based learning to a greater extent than was previously possible in our curriculum.

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The College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University: Integrating Faculty, Staff, and Community Resources through Learning Communities

James Poff

Learning communities are centered on the exploration of issues that cut across traditional academic boundary lines to include student affairs offices and community members.

The College of St. Benedict (CSB) and St. John's University (SJU) are residential, Catholic, undergraduate liberal arts colleges located four miles apart in St. Joseph and Collegeville, Minnesota. CSB, a women's college, and SJU, a men's college, have a coordinate undergraduate academic program with a combined enrollment of approximately 3,800 students.

The partnership of CSB/SJU with support from the Bush Foundation has developed a multi-year initiative to integrate and coordinate students' in-class and out-of-class learning. In order to produce the kinds of graduates these institutions desire, the colleges needed to take a broader, more inclusive, and more integrative perspective on learning; that is, to consider how different kinds of learning experiences, both within and outside the classroom, could best complement and enhance one another. Learning community projects best met this objective by promoting and supporting the efforts of faculty and staff working collaboratively. These projects foster the development of campus-wide structures and programs integrating classroom learning with students' out-of-class experiences.

The St. Benedict/St. John's conceptualization of learning communities is somewhat different from that described in existing literature. The learning community projects presented here illustrate an effort to extend the possibilities of learning community structures beyond what has become the traditional definition offered in the introductory chapter. Some of the better-known learning communities are designed to integrate beginning students into the college community. The residence programs at St. Benedict and St. John's already do that well, so the CSB/SJU learning community projects aim to build on those strengths while stretching into new areas. The vision is to extend the classroom walls using several models that in different ways seek the integration of in-class and out-of-class learning. Ultimately, this learning community model is to integrate student learning in ways that are not simply additive, but, rather, will be transformative of the teaching/learning experience.

Learning communities are centered on the exploration of issues that cut across traditional academic boundary lines to include student affairs offices and community members. Students can join learning communities in Asian Studies, Healthy Living, Environmental Studies, Gender, and Learning through Difference. Some communities, such as Asian Studies, involve students in a self-selected range of extra-curricular activities, both campus- and community-based. Others, such as Environmental Studies, enroll students as a cohort group in a series of related courses that cross disciplines and include field experiences. The learning community on gender is a reading group composed of faculty, staff, and students. While there is a multiplicity of structures in the learning community

project, there is also a high degree of intentionality in putting elements together and choosing to become involved.

Developing these varied structures requires a collaborative effort from faculty working with administrators, student development and other staff, and non-campus individuals. These people join students in a shared learning environment where all participants are encouraged to discover new connections and strive for integrated solutions. Faculty gain the opportunity to work closely with colleagues in different areas, as well as the intellectual stimulation of a new learning adventure, as they see ways to design new learning environments/experiences for the community. Students in a learning community benefit from the camaraderie of the team as they practice making, sharing, and evaluating knowledge. Both students and faculty become teachers and learners, as do the other staff involved in the community. By the end of the experience, students are able to create links across academic disciplines and across institutional divisions, and make new connections between academic studies and real-world experiences and issues.

For more information about each of the CSB/SJU Learning Community Projects, see the website: www.csbsju.edu/extending.