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Learning Community Snapshots

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*Barbara Leigh Smith
The Evergreen State College*

Learning communities are part of **Arizona State University's** (ASU) overall effort to become a premier institution in undergraduate education. Campus Match offers freshmen the chance to enroll in a first-semester learning community that includes two general education courses, a composition course, and a student success seminar taught by a peer mentor. The program involves more than 1,000 students. For further information about Campus Match contact Carol Williams (carol.williams@asu.edu) or www.asu.edu/duas/campmat. Other types of learning communities on the ASU campus are based in particular residence halls or colleges. Manzanita Hall is a Freshman-Year Experience residential community. Specific floors are reserved for freshmen students in the College of Education, College of Engineering and Applied Sciences, and College of Business. For more information, see www.asu.edu/reslife/Sonora.html. In the center of campus, McClintock Hall is also a Freshman-Year Experience residence housing Fine Arts, Public Programs, and Athena communities. See www.asu.edu/reslife/McClintock.html. Fall 2003, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is introducing four academically-themed Living/Learning Communities. For further information, see www.asu.edu/clas/lcsite/learning.html.

First-year Opportunity for Comprehensive, Unified Study (FOCUS) is **Duke University's** learning community for first-semester freshmen. A living-learning program, the 375 students (25 percent of the entering freshmen) in FOCUS take three or four of their five courses together. Students can choose among twelve FOCUS sections with different interdisciplinary themes such as "Exploring the Mind," "Visions of Freedom," "International Pop Culture," "Evolution and Humankind," "Changing Face of Russia," and "Biotechnology and Social Change." The university seminar and writing requirements are also met through the FOCUS program, which employs various forms of active learning. Each FOCUS learning community includes a weekly seminar over dinner where faculty and students have the opportunity to pull the threads of the week's learning together and build community. FOCUS is taught by full-time faculty who report that teaching in the program is stimulating, often including Duke's most motivated students. For further information, contact the learning community coordinator, Babs Wise, (bwise@aas.duke.edu) or pmac.aas.duke.edu/focus.

A number of research universities have developed learning communities to work within the constraints of a statewide core curriculum. **Georgia State University** is one example. Georgia State's Freshman Learning Communities (FLCs) are designed around clusters of general education courses. The program includes more than thirty-three clusters, involves more than 800 students, and continues to grow rapidly. In their first semester, students take all five of their core courses in a learning community cluster. In the second semester, the learning community allows the students more latitude in choosing some outside courses. The learning communities cover a broad range of topics and involve faculty from five of the colleges within the University. Typical FLCs include "The Global

Business and Society,” “Law and Society,” and “African American Studies.” Georgia State wants to attract full-time faculty to the program. Faculty apply to teach in learning communities through a Request for Proposal Process. Assessment results have been very promising, indicating that the FLC program substantially improves student retention. For further information: www.gsu.edu/ugs.

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is a large open-admissions campus and the major research university in Indiana. Created out of a merger between Indiana University and Purdue University in 1969, this commuter campus is characterized by many autonomous professional schools, each with their own buildings and distinctive cultures. The learning community effort focuses on strengthening retention for its first-year students.

Like many freshman experience classes, IUPUI’s first-year seminars are one- or two-credit classes that provide students with an introduction to college learning and resources and a small supportive environment for practicing communications and thinking skills in an academic context. Unlike many freshman experience classes, these seminars are planned and executed by an instructional *team*, (comprised of a faculty member, a librarian, and a student peer mentor, and assisted by an academic advisor) which collaboratively shapes the seminar’s syllabus and pedagogy. In addition, about one half of the 109 freshman seminars are linked to courses in the disciplines. Where this is the case, the faculty member of the linked class is usually the faculty member on the freshman seminar’s instructional team. The teaching teams adhere to a “template” of agreed-upon learning outcomes and pedagogical strategies for the first-year seminar. They also use an expectation-setting contract, “A Partnership for Academic Excellence,” signed by each student, which lays out mutual understandings for students’ first-year experience. Beyond these common elements, each team shapes its own syllabus and learning experiences for its seminar.

The freshman seminars are one strand of a larger effort to create a coherent, successful experience for beginning students. IUPUI’s evaluations reveal that the freshman seminar programs have improved student retention and now reach three-quarters of the entering class. An equally significant, “unexpected and exciting” outcome of this learning community design has been for an enhanced sense of collegiality among those in the instructional team. Next steps for IUPUI include developing thematic learning communities with faculty collaboration and more curricular integration. For further information, contact learning community coordinator, Barbara Jackson (bjackson@iupui.edu) or www.iupui.edu.

Iowa State University has a large learning community program that spans its many colleges and a well-developed cross-institutional infrastructure to oversee the overall effort. Led by co-directors from academic affairs and student affairs, the Iowa State effort is characterized by careful assessment work, systematic faculty development, and clear leadership from the top. The learning community effort was part of an overall institutional focus on improving teaching and learning that began in the early 1990s. Other supportive institutional moves included the establishment of a Center for Teaching Excellence, creation of a new leadership

position to oversee undergraduate education, and revision of the university's promotion and tenure guidelines to include the scholarship of teaching.

With no core curriculum and most general education determined by the colleges and departments, Iowa State has chosen to develop varied learning communities tailored to the unique needs of students in different areas. They categorize learning communities as course-based, residential, or course-based residential. In course-based learning communities students enroll in two or three courses together, with the cluster often including a writing course. Approximately one third of the learning communities include a residential component. The learning community program has resulted in significant increases in student retention and student satisfaction as well as statistically significant increases in student knowledge and use of the university's resources. Learning communities currently serve more than 2,000 students. For further information contact Doug Gruenewald (dgrenwld@iastate.edu) or www.iastate.edu/~learncommunity.

Syracuse University has twenty-one residential and six non-residential learning communities, enrolling over 1,700 students. The long-term goal is to involve at least half of the undergraduates at Syracuse in a learning community. The overall LC program has clearly defined mission and goals. Residential learning communities are partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs that intentionally integrate academic and co-curricular experiences; non-residential learning communities are interdisciplinary partnerships that intentionally integrate academic courses and experiences. Models range from linked courses in specific disciplines open only to freshmen to interest-based models open to all students. All models are required to have learning outcomes, an academic component, and an assessment plan. One of the non-residential learning communities is the higher education graduate program in the School of Education, which is the home of many major research studies of learning communities. For more information contact the faculty coordinator Sandra Hurd (snhurd@syr.edu) or <http://lc.syr.edu>.

After an extensive review of its general education program, the **University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA)** began offering cluster courses in 1997 to address the need to bring more coherence to the general education program, to strengthen basic skills of entering students, and to provide a small-class experience. The program was established as a five-year pilot program to include ten clusters. Each enrolls approximately 120 students, enabling half of UCLA's entering students to participate in the program. Clusters proposals are submitted by teams of faculty and vetted by Academic Senate sub-committees. Each cluster consists of a yearlong series of three interdisciplinary courses organized around a theme. Recent cluster themes included "Biotechnology and Society," "Politics, Society, and Culture," "Perception and Illusion: Cognitive Psychology, Literature, and Art," and "Evolution of the Cosmos and Life." The clusters are typically two lecture courses taught by teams of faculty and graduate teaching fellows, and a small discussion section. In the spring students also enroll in a

small “satellite course,” which explores the theme in more detail. UCLA has done extensive studies of the clusters program’s impact on students, graduate teaching assistants, and faculty. The studies are available on the UCLA website. Results from the second-year assessment study indicate that cluster students on average have higher GPAs and more units completed than non-cluster students at the end of their first academic year. Students report that clusters offer more community than their other courses as well as a stronger emphasis on writing, analytic skills, library skills, and understanding of current events. Faculty see cluster benefits in terms of high levels of collegiality, intellectual stimulation, work on pedagogy, and the opportunity to create new courses. Faculty concerns center on departmental incentives and support, the heavier workload, and the challenges of creating coherence within the clusters. For further information contact Arianne Walker (ArianneW@college.ucla.edu) or www.college.ucla.edu/ge/clusters.

At the **University of Colorado at Boulder** expanding the range and number of “academic neighborhoods” is a major goal of its strategic plan. Within the College of Arts and Sciences this goal means giving all undergraduate students the opportunity to learn in small class settings where discussions can freely take place. Learning communities are a way of accomplishing this. FallFEST is an opportunity for first-quarter freshmen to enroll in linked classes that meet general education requirements. Initiated in 1992, FESTs are designed to ease the transition to college. Students register for a block of courses and an accompanying workshop that provides orientation and support services to ensure their academic success. Living-learning communities are also available at CU-Boulder. Students can join one of seven different Residential Academic Programs (RAPs) organized around different academic interests. Programs include Farrand (humanities and service learning), Smith Hall (international), Baker (environmental sciences), Kitteridge (honors), Sewell (American studies), and Williams Village (leadership). RAPs typically involve 300-400 students living in a common residence hall with special curriculum, cultural events and support services. www.colorado.edu/prospective/freshman/academics.

The **University of Hawaii** established the first learning communities on the campus in 1990 in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences. The foundational program was, and is, the freshman entry Access to College Excellence (ACE), modeled after Freshman Interest Groups. Further models with varying degrees of curricular integration have since been developed and assessed. These include Freshman Seminars, which link groups of ten freshmen in up to three general education courses led by upper-classmen or graduate students, and the Rainbow Advantage Program, a coordinated studies model that has served as an experimental laboratory for curricular design, including an emphasis on service-learning and information literacy. The Selected Studies program also links general education and service-learning and/or information literacy courses for freshman honors students. All three programs also offer options for on-campus residents. Beginning in 1994, the College Focus Program in the College of Social

Sciences offered learning communities at the upper-division level, linking disciplines as diverse as Anthropology, Political Science, Journalism, Ethnic Studies, Sociology, Theater, and Dance. High levels of curricular and faculty integration have been key elements of these learning communities.

The learning communities now reach up to 27 percent of all entering freshmen. In 1997, the First Year at Manoa (FYM) program was developed to promote learning community options, as well as first-year student services, as a comprehensive package to incoming freshmen and transfer students. Other responsibilities of FYM include the development of curricularly integrated learning communities, faculty training, and program assessment. Since the inception of FYM, learning community options have multiplied, offering students more than forty different learning community clusters each Fall semester. Assessment of the learning communities shows success in creating communities of scholars, enhancing recruitment, improving retention, and positively affecting faculty relations with colleagues. In-depth studies are now being done to assess the differences between the various learning community models to provide an empirical basis for improving program quality. For further information, contact FYM coordinator Paige K. Wilmeth (pw@advisers.hawaii.edu).

The **University of Illinois** has one of the oldest living-learning communities called Unit One, established in 1971. Small group learning, service-learning, and intensive writing characterize the program that involves approximately seventy five courses each year. In 1999 the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences began offering another learning community program that has grown from 300 in fall 1999 to 950 in fall 2002. Though the learning community program is administered by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, participation is open to freshmen in two other colleges: Education and Commerce and Business Administration. There are more than 51 learning communities that register students in three classes satisfying general education requirements and a small discussion session led by an upper-class learning leader. This discussion class also forms study groups and undertakes a group project that is presented to the community at the end of the semester. The discussion group is intended to build community and skills in collaboration. Assessment results indicate that students in the learning communities are exhibiting a degree completion rate that is 10 percent higher than the average for the college as a whole. For further information contact Brian Rainer (b-rainer@uiuc.edu) or http://www.las.uiuc.edu/learning_community.

The **University of Missouri-Columbia** (MU) has created a wide variety of living-learning programs for students to promote their academic and personal success. More than 3,300 students (60 percent of their residential students) participate in one of twenty-three sponsored learning communities or eighty-five Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs). The learning communities, developed in conjunction with each of the academic schools and colleges at MU, provide students with shared academic or personal interests to live together and

participate in a wide variety of learning supportive experiences. The nationally-recognized FIG program at MU provides an even richer experience by clustering small groups of new students, co-enrolling them in three courses and a seminar focused on specific academic majors or themes, and assigning them to the same residential community. Each FIG cluster is assigned an upper-division peer advisor (PA) who not only lives with the students, but also co-teaches the seminar course with a faculty mentor assigned to each FIG. Frequently, the faculty member also teaches one of the three courses. Most of the FIGs are “nested” within one of the sponsored learning communities that shares the same academic theme, allowing for interaction with a wider variety of students, including other upper-division students. Since its inception in 1995, the program has served as a model for other institutions across the country, expanded to include co-enrollment for the second semester, and stimulated the creation of Transfer Interest Groups (TRIGs). Students who participate in these living-learning programs have demonstrated significantly higher levels of academic achievement, increased institutional retention, and more satisfaction than non-participants, even after controlling for academic ability. This program is run as a collaborative venture between the College of Arts and Sciences and Residential Life, with the associate dean and director, respectively, co-directing the program. For more information, contact Frankie Minor (MinorF@missouri.edu) or Andrew Beckett (BeckettA@missouri.edu) or <http://reslife.missouri.edu/housing/lcs.html>.

In 1982 the **University of Oregon** (UO) invented and began offering the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) model of learning communities that has become widespread in research universities. UO now offers more than fifty FIGs each fall, thirteen Residential FIGs, and a smaller number of Transfer Interest Groups (TRIGs). Each FIG consists of twenty-five students who take two or three thematically-linked general education courses together as well as a one-credit college connections course which is taught by one of the FIG faculty. FIG teaching assistants also provide peer support. In fall 2002, TRIGs were offered in psychology, sociology, journalism, landscape architecture, and environmental studies to upper-division students who wanted the opportunity for more mentoring and thematic study. “Pathways” is an additional learning community option that began in 1999. Five pathway programs are now offered, which provide a one- or two-year curriculum of clustered courses. Thematic areas currently include “Order and Law,” “Elementary Education,” “Human Nature,” “America in Context,” and “Monet’s Garden.” <http://learning.uoregon.edu/figs>.

The **University of Texas-El Paso** (UTEP) has one of the most ambitious learning community programs to serve students interested in math, science and engineering. A minority-serving institution, most of UTEP’s students commute, and many are first-generation college students. Many of these students come to the university with high expectations but also many “risk” factors, including limited academic proficiency, limited college survival skills, and no role models. The Circle of Learning for Entering Students (CircLES) program was designed to address these risk factors and ensure the student’s academic success. Heavily

funded by the National Science Foundation, CircLES was established in 1998 as one part of a large grant, Models for Institutions for Excellence (MIE). The learning community includes an intensive one-week summer orientation, course clustering, and personalized mentoring and advising. The CircLES Program is based on the cluster model of four loosely linked courses: mathematics, English, a discipline-base thematic First-Year Seminar, and a science or engineering course. Three-year assessment results demonstrate that CircLES students are more likely to stay in school and earn better grades.

As a result of the success of the CircLES pilot program, in 1999 UTEP adopted a university-wide program for entering students. Called the UTEP Entering Student Program (ESP), the new effort is housed in the newly established University College. ESP includes a variety of cluster models often linking a First-Year Seminar with English, mathematics, or a core course. Clusters are also available that include a developmental course in English or mathematics, and a supplemental instruction course. For further information, contact Cathy Willermet (cwillermet@utep.edu) or <http://univstudies.utep.edu>.

The **University of Utah's** LEAP program is a program for first-year students that began in 1994 with 125 students. The program currently enrolls 600 students, approximately one quarter of entering freshmen. LEAP is distinctive in terms of having its own full-time faculty who serve as the students' advisor for the first year. LEAP is a yearlong freshman program built around general education and specific student interests in different majors, such as business, architecture, engineering, and health, as well as the liberal arts. It usually includes three courses with an academic freshman seminar serving as the site of integration. LEAP is writing intensive and also fulfills the student's general education requirement in diversity. Some sections of LEAP are designed for students who have not yet decided on a major. For further information, contact J. Price (Price-J@ugs.utah.edu) or www.ugs.utah.edu/leap/.

The **University of Washington** (UW) was one of the earliest institutions to adopt learning communities and continues to offer freshman interests groups (FIGs) that reach nearly 75 percent of all entering freshmen. Extensive local research as well as a major study by Syracuse University scholar Vincent Tinto on this program demonstrates its effectiveness in terms of student retention, student satisfaction, and student achievement. The learning community program also involves a substantial peer mentor component that is well supported through an extensive training and support system. The University of Washington has used its FIG program as a platform for a variety of other initiatives as well, including technology and service-learning. UW also pioneered the idea of Transfer Interest Groups, which are now offered in a number of majors. For further information contact Michaelann Jundt (mjundt@u.washington.edu).

The **University of Wisconsin** has a variety of living-learning communities directed at special populations (Bradley is all freshmen; WISE is women in the sciences and engineering) or specific interest areas (Global Village is aimed at

students interested in international affairs; Chadbourne is aimed at liberal arts students). These learning communities employ various models ranging from fully team-taught programs to linked courses. Community is developed at all levels—through the staffing structure, programming in the residence halls, fee setting, decision-making, etc. Two new programs will have an international and multicultural focus.

In fall 2001 the University of Wisconsin also initiated a First Year Interest Group (FIG) program where students enroll in a cluster of three courses linked by a common theme. One of the courses is a small core course, limited to twenty FIG students, that integrates the thematic content from the other two linking courses. “The Serious Mental Illness FIG,” for example, consists of courses in social work, general psychology, and sociology. Students do integrating service-learning projects. The fact that the leader of this integrating course is a faculty member and that content integration is fundamental to the program design, distinguishes this FIG program from many others, according to coordinator Greg Smith. Thirteen FIGs were offered in 2002. The FIG program is expected to grow to 30 FIGs within two years. For further information contact Greg Smith glsmith@lssaa.wisc.edu, ambrower@facstaff.wisc.edu, www.lssaa.wisc.edu/figs, or www.housing.wisc.edu.