Chapter 3
Creating Supportive and Challenging Learning Environments:
The Learning Community Experience

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and each other.

Paulo Freire,
Pedagogy of the Oppressed

This chapter introduces the essentials of a learning community approach. We discuss various learning community models designed by faculty and academic staff for underprepared students that respond to issues raised in previous chapters. Thumbnail accounts of successful programs illustrate how learning communities can be both supportive and challenging for students new to higher education and academic work. They counter fragmented curricula, student disengagement, and faculty isolation, three factors that undermine efforts to provide an education of quality. Then, we turn to research on the impact of learning communities on student learning and what students say about their experience.

Defining learning communities

The expression “learning community” has been used to describe people learning together in a classroom, in a residential hall, across a campus, and in an entire town. As we use it, “learning communities” refers to a variety of approaches to curricular reform that departs from the usual pattern of teachers teaching separate classes in separate subjects to separate groups of students. Learning communities link or cluster classes during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme or question, that enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional restructuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, among students and their teachers, and to build curricular connections.¹

Learning communities vary from an integrative one- or two-credit seminar taken with two or more courses over a semester or quarter up to a full-time, one- or two-year program of integrated study. Campus models include freshmen interest groups, learning clusters, coordinated studies, interdisciplinary studies, federated learning communities, paired or linked courses, and wholly new inventions as well as a combination of models that may include linked assignments.² All these curricular designs are adaptable to the particular circumstances of any campus, the needs of its students, and faculty strengths and interests. Any of these models can have residence life components, other co-curricular components such as community-based service learning, and activities such as going on field trips, organizing potluck dinners, attending cultural events, and facilitating a campus-wide book seminar.

Learning communities vary based on degrees of curricular integration and the amount of collaboration among faculty; they also vary in terms of who teaches them, often involving full- and part-time faculty, counselors, student affairs professionals, and librarians. Sometimes advising, counseling, library research, reading and study skills, and tutoring in writing, mathematics, and the
sciences are part of learning communities. Whatever the combinations, the aim is to foster explicit social and intellectual connections among people and ideas. At their best, all versions of learning communities practice pedagogies of active engagement and reflection, and students learn how to collaborate and take responsibility in the learning process.

**Centrality of peer group**

Learning communities promise students something very special—friendship through scholarship. They build on the social nature of learning and proven power of the peer group to encourage student engagement (Astin 1993). Almost all public accounts of learning communities allude to this aspect of the learning community experience. For instance, De Anza Community College in Northern California, recognized for its distinguished work in ESL and developmental education (McCabe 2003; Roueche and Roueche 1999), introduces its Learning in Communities (LinC) program to students in this way: “The purpose of Learning Communities is to promote the success of our students by offering a better way to learn. We learn naturally by making connections between different ideas and experiences. In Learning Communities, we integrate two or more subjects to create a better and easier understanding of both. You work with the same community of students in the linked classes, helping each other succeed and making friends along the way. With some common readings and assignments, you learn more and complete more units with less stress.” Many learning communities also involve peer mentoring and other forms of students teaching students.

**Centrality of collaborative learning**

One of the core pedagogies associated with learning community programs is active and collaborative learning. Like learning communities, “collaborative learning” is an expression that resonates with many educators because it recasts learning as a social and interactive activity. Jean MacGregor (1990) traces collaboration in education to the work of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky who developed some of the basic tenets of experiential learning and emphasized the teacher’s role in creating contexts for students to discover, construct, and reconstruct their understanding of the world. As MacGregor indicates, various communities of practice have enriched an understanding of collaborative learning, among these the cooperative learning movement, disciplinary-based strategies for peer learning especially in mathematics and writing, and problem-based approaches to learning.

Collaborative learning reframes the student role by requiring students to shift from a passive, privatized, and competitive learning mode to active, public, and cooperative ways of working. Group work often depends on individual reading, preparation of questions, and reflective writing before class. Because attendance affects group work, it is not a strictly personal matter. As MacGregor notes

Many students . . . have difficulty accepting that collaborative learning with peers is real learning and has value, so conditioned are they to expecting teachers to be the sole source of knowledge in the classroom. Moreover,
there are the risks inherent in the public nature of collaborative work. Such work almost always entails talk, and a great deal of it. Learning collaboratively, students are working out loud, and the learning is “live”—on the air, as it were, bloopers and all. (1990, 26)

Dualistic and beginning thinkers (Perry 1970) often experience the most discomfort when teachers and texts are no longer viewed as authoritative. Perhaps student unease with this approach may explain why Hunter Boylan, who names learning communities as a best-practice instructional strategy within developmental education, voices this caution: “They are not for everyone in spite of the research documenting their success; some developmental students learn best in traditional courses” (2002, 70). Boylan includes this point under “tips,” but offers no further elaboration. On the other hand, staying with students’ preferences that reinforce passive approaches to learning and a tendency to repeat the learning of what is already known, does not serve well students who aspire to a college education, a point Cross makes in her portrait of the learner as a weak swimmer. Collaborative learning is not education as usual; it introduces community expectations into the classroom equation and alters the role of the teacher.

Paulo Freire’s “banking conception of knowledge” is often cited to explain how interactive collaborative learning differs from a teaching-student relationship where teachers narrate or “tell” and students mechanically listen and memorize the narration. In the narrative education model, minds are containers to be filled, the places for deposits. Teachers do the depositing. Good teachers deposit more; good students take in more, an approach similar to a quantified conception of knowledge that is described in the research literature on deep learning. As Freire observes:

> In the banking conception of knowledge, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates knowledge and education as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher’s existence—but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher.

> The *raison d’etre* of libertarian education, on the other hand, lies in its drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students. (1970, 53)

Freire replaces the banking conception of knowledge with a model that sees knowledge as socially and culturally constructed. The epigraph for this chapter...
illustrates the difference: “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and each other” (1970). For Freire, collaborative learning is both pedagogy and epistemology. His views on education and teaching-and-learning apply to all learners—beginning, developing, and advanced. They originated from his teaching experience in an adult-education and literacy program he created for workers and peasants in an impoverished region in northeast Brazil, near Recife, where he grew up.

An active stance toward the world such as the one Freire describes is founded on a deep appreciation for what significant differences among people and communities of people imply for informed action in a world of extraordinary multiplicity.

**Centrality of attending to diversity**

Patrick Hill shares Freire’s views on the social and cultural construction of knowledge. A member of the faculty at The Evergreen State College, Hill recognizes that the organizational structures of the academy influence the teaching and learning process, fragmenting curriculum and often failing to promote learning as a social process and source of knowledge. In a speech given at Washington Center’s Inaugural Conference on Learning Communities, during his tenure as provost, Hill introduced the underlying rationale for learning communities:

> the fundamental structural move is to link related enterprises and to make structural changes which release, for faculties and students, the powers of human association. Dewey, among other people, has stressed that in our individualistic age we have forgotten about the powers of human association—what happens when you put people together. For example the stimulation of thought, the exposure to diversity, the need to clarify one’s thinking in the community . . .

It is common to coordinated studies, to clusters and linked courses, and to federated learning communities, to put people together and give them time and space—real time and space—to learn from each other. You are releasing the capacity of people to learn from each other, and it is as simple as that, what we are after . . . If you create those opportunities and make them real, and reward them, then a tremendous gush of creativity comes forth and people start to learn again, and to feel excited about their work. (1985, 4-5)

For Hill, the “exposure to diversity” is critical to authentic collaborative learning. In a later article for *Change* magazine, again on the rationale for learning communities, Hill extends community to mean a place or process by which diverse others engage in “conversations of respect” (1991, 41).

Hill has developed a variety of classroom practices that introduce new students to what he regards as their essential work at Evergreen, learning how to collaborate. In a recent lecture at the beginning of the fall 2003 quarter, Hill asks, “why are there such diverse opinions in the world? How come talking doesn’t
help us reach one opinion?” He weaves an Evergreen expectation—learning across significant differences—with insights drawn from the parable of the elephant and six blind men (who each know something different and partial about the elephant) to illustrate complex ideas related to the social and cultural construction of knowledge and the hard work that sustains authentic collaboration. He explains how each person in the yearlong coordinated studies program will be thinking, questioning, and actively learning from others. Students will write reader response papers based on a common book: each person will identify four or five meaningful passages that they want to talk about and one thing “that would make me want to throw the book across the room if I was the kind of person who I desperately am trying not to be.” Teams of five students will meet to take turns reading their response papers; everyone will listen without comment. Later students will listen, without comment, to their teammates’ responses to their paper. These weekly team meetings model attentive listening, the indispensable preparation for a seminar where the aim is to construct knowledge through dialogue. For Hill, conversations of respect are an intentional and learned practice. Participants’ experience and insights will be intrinsic to the knowledge the group constructs—its common property.

William Koolsbergen describes two pedagogical practices associated with collaborative learning as a distinctive epistemology. A professor of humanities at LaGuardia Community College who teaches in thematically-linked liberal arts clusters and the developmental program’s New Student House, Koolsbergen notes that in his oral communication class where thirty of thirty-five students will be from different cultural groups, students use their own often contradictory and diverse personas to appreciate how social roles are constructed and apprehended. He recounts how this new perception opens the door to learning from others’ experience and cultural knowledge:

Diversity is more than ensuring that our classes reflect a diversity of texts to reflect the diversity of our students. In learning communities especially, “doing” diversity means engaging in dialogue, confronting, and grappling with our diverse personas. Students are asked to engage in a variety of roles each day. Our students are workers, parents, children, non-native speakers, and retirees. They also come from culturally diverse backgrounds. Often they play multiple roles at one time when their work, family, language, and learning intersect. The class discussion is about how we construct these personas or have them assigned to us; the sensitivity to diversity follows as we deconstruct these social roles and look at what positive and negative attributes we attach to them. Because learning communities are designed by faculty from different disciplines who come together to find a way to approach teaching and learning through the different perspective of the disciplines, they are the ideal structure for dealing with diversity. (Koolsbergen 2001, 26)

Koolsbergen explains how faculty and students in the learning cluster learn how to engage in discussions that will move into uncharted territory. In their first scheduled hour together at the beginning of the semester, all faculty in the
teaching team meet all the students; they discuss the syllabi and the process for collaborative work (group formation, task examination, discussion, and reporting out). At the second meeting the students actively develop the “ground rules for discussion of diversity” for their community: rules are named, listed, discussed, voted on, and then copied down by one member and everyone signs the covenant, including faculty. Rules may include expected ones such as “create a safe atmosphere for open discussion,” “assume that people do the best they can,” and “combat stereotypes . . . that prohibit group cooperation and success,” but others speak to institutionalized forms of oppression based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and the fact that we are “all systematically misinformed about our own group and about members of other groups” (26). The agreement not to blame but to educate rests on participants’ understanding of the partiality of one’s knowing and experience.

Phyllis van Slyck describes how she is redefining curriculum and pedagogy so students will not use their own experience as a frame of reference for understanding the world. van Slyck, a professor in the English department at LaGuardia who also teaches basic skills writing classes, uses Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of the “contact zone,” a space “where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other”9 as a starting place to teach a greater diversity of world literatures:

. . . our curriculum and pedagogy must acknowledge that in many American colleges today we are educating students who have come from many different cultures, whose experiences and identities define them as potential citizens of the world. Contact zones must therefore be defined more broadly as spaces where diverse world literatures, and the cultures they represent and critique, may be taught in thematically organized contexts. (van Slyck 1997, 154)

Curricular choices, which intentionally introduce nonwestern experiences, language, and values into the classroom space, disturb what people know to be true. A comparative dialogue that uses western and nonwestern texts expands participants’ cultural literacy. As van Slyck notes:

We are . . . [not] required to become immediate “experts” on the cultures in question, nor does it mean that we should teach irresponsibly without researching a particular area; rather, it means that we should begin to define our pedagogy around a more democratic and multicultural model of collaborative research, reflection, discovery, and decentering. (154)

van Slyck’s account of repositioning herself and her students in this contact zone is grounded in the particulars of texts read, students’ diverse reactions, and her commitment to moving students beyond an easy dismissal of others’ experiences. She is learning to recast discussion questions and writing assignments to privilege comparative analysis: “I asked students to find examples of cultural and religious traditions which reflect commitment and responsibility to a particular
culture (birth, death, and other rite of passage ceremonies in both western and nonwestern culture share this commitment) and to compare them . . . what are the purposes of these traditions? What values do they teach? Why is it important to teach respect for community? What would we lose if we gave this up? Can cultures accommodate both individual and communal values?" (157). The aim is to create a space for dialogue to occur where differences are explored: “Students may ultimately reject a particular practice, but they have learned the difference between an informed rejection and a naïve or unreflective one” (167). Her experience is that *all* students can meet the challenge of engaging in comparative cultural analysis and ethical negotiations and that all students can break with essentialist and monocultural notions of “truth.”

The accounts of Hill, Koolsbergen, and van Slyck represent the kind of in-the-world, self-reflective learning that many learning communities encourage. Karen Spear (2003) puts it this way: “What remains constant is that learning communities are, at their core, a liberalizing and humanizing force in a student’s education . . . while democracy need not be a subject of study, democracy becomes a practice of study within learning communities” (19). The creation of knowledge is a democratic, inclusive practice.

The impulse to turn the classroom into a place where democracy and education meet reflects a long tradition. The first learning community at the University of Wisconsin in 1927, created by philosopher and educational leader Alexander Meiklejohn, was designed to help students develop a unified scheme of reference to participate in the evolving American experience with democracy. They developed this through a two-year interdisciplinary program focused on democracy where students studied the classics and engaged in intensive dialogues on what it means to be a citizen. Meiklejohn’s colleague, John Dewey, a major force in educational reform in America and another major influence on learning community work, also saw schools as the site for developing the values and critical intelligence necessary for active participation in democratic community life.

At their best, learning communities help students develop a healthy skepticism about sure, confident knowledge, including their own. When learning is purposeful, framed by a question, theme, or issue that is sufficiently compelling and perplexing, the response is to actively seek out different perspectives and worldviews than those we know. Learning communities promote this kind of challenging learning; they try to support students in their efforts to develop an active stance toward the world, a sense of personal empowerment and personal responsibility, an ability to work with others, and an ability to deal with change, ambiguity, and complexity. These values need to be an essential feature in today’s higher education curriculum, from developmental education to graduate studies.

**Creating effective learning communities**

Where learning communities are established on campus, the kind of models adopted, and the ways a teaching team works to combine courses into an integrated curriculum vary from campus to campus. We describe some of the
Many learning community programs focus on the critical first term or first year in college where the adjustment and developmental needs of entering students are greatest and the drop out rates are highest.

Locating developmental learning communities where student need is greatest

The location of learning communities within the institution depends on the goals for a learning community initiative—for students, for faculty, for the curriculum, and for the institution. Savvy innovators connect learning communities to the external communities their campus serves, their institution’s distinctive mission and goals, existing educational innovations on the campus, and faculty strengths and interests.

Learning communities are sited throughout the academy—in developmental studies, freshmen/first-year initiatives, minors or majors, and graduate school programs; as strategies for coherence in general education and in across-curriculum initiatives such as writing, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning; and at transition points in undergraduate education from developmental to college-level work or from two- to four-year institutions. Many learning community programs focus on the critical first term or first year in college where the adjustment and developmental needs of entering students are greatest and the drop out rates are highest. Most of these programs are designed so students can develop core academic skills in reading and communications, mathematics, and the sciences.

Learning communities for developmental students need to be intentionally located in the curriculum using the same approach as the Supplemental Instruction model previously discussed, the most effective intervention strategy in developmental education (Boylan 2002). The first step is to use data from institutional research to target “high risk” areas in the academy where students experience the most difficulty. These trouble spots include:

- high-risk courses where 30 percent of the students drift away after one month
- graveyard courses where 50 percent of the students earn low grades or drop out
- gateway courses that have a reputation among students for being tough
- platform courses for entry into professional and technical programs
- transition courses for developmental students and second-language speakers moving into liberal arts and professional/technical programs

The second step is to be attentive to patterns among students who are considered to be “at risk” in higher education: do students earn the credits they sign up for? Are some courses taken more than once and by a particular group of students?
Are some racial and ethnic groups underrepresented in some courses but overrepresented in others? For instance, Vauhn Wittman-Grahler (2002), who was teaching math in a racially-diverse institution noted that in her Calculus II class 100 percent of the students were white males compared to her developmental math class which averaged about 75 percent non-Asian students of color and an equally high percentage of women students. The third and final step is to share results with advisors, counselors, and tutors to find out if the data reflects their experience regarding courses and curriculum that pose the most difficulties for students.

While many learning communities initially form based solely on the interests of two or more faculty rather than areas of student need, learning communities for students who are already at risk in higher education need to be located in curricular trouble spots. Although curriculum restructuring begins here, this starting point does not constrain creativity as examples of learning community models and curriculum illustrate. At Fayetteville Technical Community College, for instance, faculty who are leading a new learning community initiative targeted courses with poor retention and high failure rates: Introductory Algebra and Basic Chemistry I and II. They began by designing an integrated module that addressed content in each course where students struggled most, followed this positive experience by designing more modules, and eventually created a team-taught integrated course.13

Examining different learning community approaches

Many learning community models envisioned in developmental education share a common goal: to increase students’ achievement level. Like other learning communities models, those designed for developmental students are variations on three general types of learning community structures:14

a) **Interest group or “colloquy” model:** A small cohort of students enrolls in a set of two or three larger, unmodified and coherent set of classes (organized around a major, a topical inquiry, or interdisciplinary theme) and an integrative seminar that only the cohort attends. The seminar is the site for building community and curricular connections. The teaching team for the seminar varies (regular or adjunct faculty member, librarian, student affairs professional, peer mentor, graduate TA, or an instructional team of these colleagues).

b) **Paired or clustered classes:** Students co-register in two or more courses linked thematically or by content. Faculty members (and staff) coordinate syllabi and assignments, and work intentionally to build community and foster connections. Often courses are scheduled back-to-back to make a coherent time schedule and to “free space” for collaborative work, the end of one class and beginning of another a time when all teaching team members can be present for seminars, project work, and group presentations.

c) **Team-taught model:** Students enroll in a co-planned and co-taught program of study across disciplines and skill areas that is usually focused on a theme or question. Teaching teams of faculty members sometimes include student affairs professionals, counselors, and librarians. The blurring of boundaries...
between disciplines and courses favor a larger whole. This intense working together—and then working with students—represents faculty development at its best, highly-contextualized and particular, not generic; our learning is no different than our students’ learning.

**Investigating possibilities for integration**

For some campus teams, the choice of learning community models depends on the common ground arrived at during a curricular planning workshop (Malnarich and Lardner 2003). An abilities-based approach that asks potential teaching partners the question used by Alverno to design its abilities-based curriculum is one way to discover common ground: What do we want students to know and be able to do as a result of their participation in a particular course? People individually reflect on what they value most in relation to student learning, what their aspirations are for their students, and the abilities, skills, ideas, habits of mind, and attitudes that represent specific course outcomes. The “teaching partners” share their work to discover potential areas for curricular integration. Agreement on common expectations or learning outcomes is a fertile ground for designing an integrative or “linked assignment” where two sets of students, from two different courses, work together on the same assignment or project that has been developed by “teaching partners.” Often this exercise in creating a linked assignment leads to the assignment being implemented, and further experimentation. Some campus learning communities’ initiatives include a variety of models along with linked assignments. This approach connects people who would like to become involved in learning communities but who also want to assess the impact on their students’ learning before proceeding with a more integrated model.

**Choosing models based on aims and circumstances**

One clear structural advantage of most learning community models over stand-alone courses is that faculty and academic support staff have *more time, more space, and more resources* immediately at hand to work with new and underprepared students. As the case studies in Section Two indicate campus learning communities for developmental students are variations on the three general models. A data-driven analysis of student needs, collaborative possibilities from curriculum planning sessions, and available institutional resources (including staffing, scheduling, administrative support, and funding) are some of the factors underlying the mix of models a campus chooses to implement. Most campuses begin learning community work by linking courses together and scheduling them back-to-back. Some of these links are taught separately; some are fully integrated and team taught; some teams elect to teach some classes together. Elaborate models are not necessarily the best way to support students who are struggling in high-risk courses: simple links or pairs can be scaled-up to serve most underprepared students who arrive at college as the Grossmont Community College case study illustrates. A version of the Critical Inquiry seminar/course at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis may reach many more students at large institutions than a coordinated studies program.
The following table groups different learning community programs briefly highlighted in the rest of this chapter in relation to effective curricular practices in developmental education.

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<th>Developmental education best practices and learning community (LC) examples</th>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Adopt an abilities-based developmental perspective in LCs and throughout the campus</strong></td>
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<td>• California State University, Hayward—cluster with ability-based English component</td>
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<td>• De Anza College—one lecture class/three different writing cohorts</td>
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<td>• Sandhills Community College—flexible movement between developmental levels</td>
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<td>• Seattle Central Community College—integrated program/range of abilities-based credits</td>
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<td>• <em>Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)—integrative seminar focused on developing all students’ academic abilities</em></td>
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<td>• <strong>Target high-risk courses</strong></td>
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<td>• Edmonds Community College—chemistry/math</td>
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<td>• Fayetteville Technical and Community College—math/chemistry</td>
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<td>• <em>Grossmont Community College—reading/writing links</em></td>
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<td>• <em>Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)—integrative seminar linked to electives, gateway courses</em></td>
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<td>• Shoreline Community College—reading/writing/critical thinking three-course sequence</td>
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<td>• <em>University of Texas at El Paso—math and pre-engineering/science cluster</em></td>
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<td>• <strong>Integrate skill development with college level courses (college credit)</strong></td>
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<td>• De Anza College—developmental reading/writing pair linked with college courses</td>
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<td>• Fayetteville Technical Community College—developmental writing/sociology</td>
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<td>• Northwest Indian College-TENRM—developmental first quarter in 2-year program</td>
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<td>• Spokane Falls Community College—reading/study skills paired with multiple courses</td>
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<td>• <strong>Design a holistic program (integrate academic and student support services; use peer tutors)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Baltimore City College—student success/developmental course pair</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <em>California State University, Hayward—cluster includes academic success component</em></td>
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<td>• <em>IUPUI—counselors</em></td>
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<td>• UTEP science/engineering graduates) are advisors, mentors</td>
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<tr>
<td>• LaGuardia Community College—developmental reading/writing/speech cluster/counselor taught seminar</td>
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*scaled-up models
Including essential components in developmental learning communities

Learning communities for developmental students should be engaging, supportive, and challenging. Effective programs combine support with high expectations and intellectual rigor; they integrate skills and content, and are reading/writing intensive. Mathematics and science are also integral to these learning community efforts. Some learning communities that integrate developmental courses and college-level courses allow developmental students to earn college credit.

Our expectations regarding the quality of learning communities are not different for underprepared students. We recognize in John Tagg’s account of an “awakening class,” the kind of student and faculty engagement that is central to learning community work whether students are beginning, developing, or advanced in their studies:

If a class goes well, there is a certain point in the term where it awakens, grows up, takes charge of itself, becomes a class instead of a group of strangers yoked unwillingly together . . . A class that is working is never really like any other because it really is negotiating its own meanings, negotiating itself . . . I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it . . . When students come into the room, you can see that they know where they are, that it is no longer a strange place. This coming together as a new thing seems to me to happen sooner in learning communities. And I think that it happens more strongly too. (Tagg 2003, 262)

A community like this, though, does not develop by chance; a particular pedagogy makes it possible for students in Tagg’s class to “take charge” of their learning in the way he describes. For instance, in Teaching with Your Mouth Shut (2000), the late Don Finkel, a masterful designer of conceptual workshops, describes a practice where the posing of an initial puzzle or contradiction hooks students into increasingly complex and reflective inquiry. They read a series of texts that illuminate aspects of the puzzle that they discuss with others, guided by questions and writing exercises.

Learning communities for developmental students may differ from other learning communities in one critical respect: we need to address students’ approaches to learning explicitly. As the first monograph chapter “Taking the Risk to Learn” indicates, students need to explore their conceptions of learning and intelligence using a similar approach to the one Finkel describes. Challenging curriculum—especially focused on the theme of learning that examines research findings on learning and intelligence, learning theory, and related instructional and curriculum practices—supports students in a deep and enduring way by giving them the means to critique their school experience from a new position, that of an able learner.

Faculty experienced in creating collaborative learning environments take care to involve students in establishing the guidelines or social contract for creating a risk-taking community where everyone treats everyone’s contributions with respect. By reframing risk taking as a collaborative practice not solely as an individual behavior, we offer less confident learners possibilities for peer-supported risk taking.
Developing campus partnership and support

Learning communities for developmental students require campus-wide commitment and support that is problem-oriented and emphasizes collaborative problem solving. Data-based decisions on where to locate learning communities to benefit underprepared and struggling students require the cooperation of institutional research and the registrar’s office. Bringing people together to coordinate their work with underprepared students—advising, counseling, tutoring, lab work, and classroom instruction in both developmental education and college-level courses—requires administrative support from different sectors of the academy. These steps that occur in the “fact-finding” planning phases of a developmental education learning community initiative do not incur additional financial costs but they require a campus commitment to all students’ academic success. For many campuses, the problems associated with underprepared students have been left to developmental education, an area typically marginalized in the academy. “At risk” students are labeled as such because higher education institutions are still underdeveloped and poorly prepared to serve underrepresented students well; the “barriers to readiness” can be read as clues signaling practices that need to be rethought.

Learning communities give students, faculty, advisors, and counselors opportunities to know one another better so that they can collectively address institutional barriers to learning. For faculty who do not usually know who among their students are most “at risk” in higher education, the realization that people’s ordinary lives means they probably will not graduate, even if they are good students, comes as a stunning surprise. People working in academic support and student affairs are far more knowledgeable about students’ lives. At their best, learning communities bring these two sides of the academy together in a teaching team or support team. Maxwell (1979) views this intentional connection as a cornerstone of effective programs for underprepared students.

Once a campus begins to pool what is known about its underprepared students and what needs to be put in place so they can be supported in their studies, most learning communities for developmental students find ways to include counselors and advisors in the teaching team. Broader issues, including institutional policies are re-invented to better serve students who are “at risk” in higher education.

a) At Baltimore City College (BCC), student affairs counselors and Skip Downing, the author of On Course (2002), a book about learning how to be responsible for your own learning at college used in many developmental classes, designed a learning community for developmental students that addressed issues related to “taking the risk to learn.” Initiated in 1998, the learning community paired a developmental course in reading, writing, or mathematics with a student success class. The counselors who taught the student success part of the class conducted interviews with each student to better understand what barriers placed them at risk and what helped them succeed. The learning community became a place where students could talk and write about becoming successful: How can we get what we want? What are the strategies for getting there? Students became deeply committed to one
another’s successes. In the second semester, students moved to the next developmental course level and continued to meet with their mentors from the first semester. BCC tracked students for three semesters to Freshman Composition. Compared to their peers, these developmental learning community students’ pass rate on the English exit exam was 78 percent on their first try compared to a pass rate of 50 percent for other students. Developmental students who passed at the higher rate were also enrolled in Freshmen Composition for the first time while many of their peers in the lower pass rate group were taking the class for the second, third, and fourth time. Math retention impressed faculty, but the success rate was not as dramatic.

b) At Northwest Indian College, the teaching team of the Tribal Environmental and Natural Resource Management (TENRM) Program realized that they needed to make two critical changes to their six-quarter learning community to better support students, including a change in college policy, after assessing the program’s pilot year. First, they decided to redesign the first quarter to include an emphasis on developmental education and the mastery of basic scientific concepts and environmental sciences terminology. Second, they adopted a non-abandonment philosophy and policy in response to students’ attendance. Northwest Indian College would calculate TENRM students’ grade point average based on courses completed not courses attempted, and returning students would be welcomed back and given assistance to complete missed work. The program’s external evaluator, Joan LaFrance, credits high completion rates to the close ties developed between faculty and students in the learning community that helped the faculty team from Huxley College of the Environment at Western Washington University and NWIC’s science and mathematics division understand the reality of most Indian and Alaskan Native students’ lives. Staying in college is extraordinarily difficult for students who may have to be absent for an extended period owing to personal circumstances, family responsibilities, and cultural traditions. (See Section Two for more information on the Lummi Nation tribal college’s learning community.)

c) At LaGuardia Community College (CUNY) in New York, students speak more than 100 different languages. The learning communities program that began in 1976 with liberal arts clusters initiated a New Student House (NSH) for developmental students in 1991-92, followed three years later by a New Student ESL House. Very poor retention rates for developmental students led to the creation of the learning cluster for developmental students. A counselor teaches the Freshman Seminars in the NSHs and, in the case of developmental students, faculty regularly meet with the counselor who offers guidance on students who are most at risk in the program. Many two- and four-year institutions from across the country have adapted both NSH models. Each New House cluster includes a three-credit college class and a one-credit Freshman Seminar. (See Section Two for a more detailed account of this program).
Working at appropriate developmental levels

Some of the most successful learning community models remove barriers to learning that developmental educators create for students through a rigid adherence to sequenced developmental courses based on placement assessments. At Greenville Technical College in South Carolina, students’ grade levels went up one course level after people attended review workshops before taking Compass and Asset entry assessments, a finding that suggests that an over-reliance on this kind of assessment would be unwise. Many learning communities prefer to adopt a flexible and abilities-based approach to placing students and awarding credit.

a) At Seattle Central Community College (SCCC), coordinated studies programs developed in the mid-1980s integrated ESL, developmental writing and reading courses, and English composition with content drawn from two or more introductory college-level courses. This learning community structure that is continually being refined allows students to “move” to appropriate writing levels despite placement results. A recognized leader in learning communities, SCCC awards credit for the highest writing level reached based on the quality of students’ written work. This approach encourages students to focus on writing as a means for effective communication. For more information contact Audrey Wright, awrigh@sccd.ctc.edu.

b) At De Anza Community College, in Cupertino, California, faculty from different departments created a new learning community model. In their learning communities’ program, they encourage students whose abilities as writers differ widely to enroll in a large college-level lecture course. They then regroup students into three distinct composition cohort links: English as a Second Language, Developmental English, and College English. Using material from the lecture courses, these writing classes offer obvious support to students, but something of greater value: the message that they can do college level work. (See Section Two of monograph).

c) At Sandhills Community College in Pinehurst, North Carolina, more than 60 percent of entering students do not meet college entrance requirements in mathematics, writing, or reading, while over 50 percent need developmental work in more than one area. Integrated by theme, Sandhills’ learning communities include developmental and college-level courses. Students can earn college credit and advance into the next developmental course level any time based on their work. For more information, contact Alfreda Stroman, stromana@sandhills.edu.

High expectations and intellectual rigor

The Schillings studied the “expectations gap” between student expectations and faculty expectations at several colleges and universities. The research findings confirmed the wide distance between faculty and students: faculty
expect students to spend three times the amount of time on their studies than they expect to spend. After one year in higher education, though, they actually spend less time than their original estimate. As to “deep learning,” students read more textbooks than primary sources, memorize formulas in science rather than applying the scientific method, and use passive studying strategies rather than those associated with higher order thinking skills. Finally, the patterns of time use students establish in the first year of their studies are repeated throughout their undergraduate experience.

Developmental students’ experience at college begins when they arrive. The Schillings’ research suggests that for these students to do well in subsequent years, they need to be challenged, a point made by Clifford Adelman in his research and discussed in Chapter Two. The view that challenging curriculum undermines students’ confidence and chances to be successful could not be further from the truth.

The Schillings report that campus participants in the expectations study came to think about the problem as “students being on the job without a job description” (Schilling and Schilling 1999, 9). In brief, faculty do not translate high expectations into practice. This does not refer to harder grading but to “heightening the intellectual challenge of courses, moving beyond memorization to engaged critical analysis that creates excitement for students. Our work suggests that it is crucial to do this in the very first semester of college, or students will resist any attempts to raise the stakes in the later years in college” (10).

One of the campuses involved in the study, a major research and open-admissions university, chose to raise its expectations for all students. The campus student profile is similar to that of commuter community colleges: 60 percent of beginning students are first-generation college students, 75 percent do not meet college-level reading, writing or mathematics placement requirements, and nearly half of the student body are enrolled part time.

At Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), the decision to expect more of most students led to the creation of Critical Inquiry (CI), a one-to-two-credit-hour course where students are introduced to the expectations and requirements for successful college learning. The CI Handbook for faculty and staff participants notes that the CI program is “open to all, but strongly recommended for first- and second-year students.” The university, determined to avoid the stigma attached to developmental education, purposefully provides transitional support for all students through the CI seminars that are linked to an introductory discipline-based course or a course in area studies such as Afro-American Studies, Women’s Studies, or Communication Studies. The seminar meets twice a week for two and one-half hours of instruction time. Materials and assignments are coordinated with discipline faculty who are closely involved in seminar curricular design and implementation. The CI model also connects students to electives, gateway courses, and a required freshman composition course. While each CI is distinctive, they also share consistent learning outcomes, seminar requirements, and an expectation-setting contract, “A Partnership for Academic Excellence,” signed by each student. Unlike most freshmen seminars, CI is resource-intensive, team planned and executed. The
planning and teaching team includes a faculty member, a librarian and technology expert, an advisor, and a peer mentor. CIs are introduced at orientation to entering students and their families, and discussed at advising sessions; they are also recommended as one option to fulfill second semester academic support requirements for conditionally admitted freshmen. For further information, contact Barbara Jackson, bjackson@iupui.edu.

**Integrating skills and content**

As Chapter Two indicates, when skill and content teaching are integrated, struggling students do better in their studies. Developmental educators reached this conclusion in the 1920s, again in the 1970s, and repeated the finding several times more in field-based best practice summaries published in the last ten years. Effective developmental courses use college curriculum to develop students’ basic academic abilities, not an array of generic skills. One clear benefit of integrating skill and content courses is that developmental educators, over time, will be able to identify the academic language that students need to master to be effective learners in higher education. For instance, an examination of introductory textbooks for the disciplines suggests some of this common vocabulary (and understanding). Words used without explanation include model, theory, perspective, paradigm, principle, policy, formula, argument, concept, fact, and so on.

At Spokane Falls Community College (SFCC), one popular model in the learning communities’ program integrates a reading and/or study skills strategy course with a content course from liberal arts or a platform course in professional and technical programs that is offered as a linked course. In 2003, for example, study skills and reading were linked with Introductory Chemistry and English Composition. Content specialists incorporate study strategies and skills into their broader teaching practice, and reading and study skills specialists develop a content-specific understanding of the learning challenges students face in an entry-level college course. (See Section Two for an account of SFCC’s developmental learning communities.)

**Reading and writing intensive developmental programs**

Students can know they belong in college by doing “real” college-level work. Unlike many skill-based developmental reading courses where students actually do very little reading and, as a consequence, programs have been judged as woefully ineffective (Adelman 1999; Maxwell 1998), the following examples of developmental learning communities are reading and writing intensive.

a) At Shoreline Community College, a three-course Developmental English sequence integrates reading, writing, thinking, and learning skills. Faculty expect students to develop these abilities by reading intellectually stimulating texts that would be assigned to any entering student and by composing essays in all levels of developmental writing. The program’s cornerstone is an eleven-part reading process that students eventually internalize and master. Students develop questions for further inquiry, identify the issues they want to pursue through study and discussion with others, and construct

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their own “vocabulary list” of key terms and background knowledge they need to understand to fully grasp authors’ intended meanings. (See Section Two.)

**b) At Grossmont Community College**, Project Success exemplifies how a small, doable practice such as creating a developmental reading and developmental writing link can be scaled up from one course to many that meet the needs of hundreds of students each term. The faculty teams who teach in these developmental links know the power of an engaging book and they take time to discuss the merits of different proposed books. Project Success is an inspiring example of a modest educational reform that began in developmental education, spread to the disciplines, and is now involving programs for honor students. Project Success also uses a simple and very effective mentoring method for introducing new faculty to the philosophy and practice of learning communities. (See Section Two.)

**Mathematics and science for developmental students**

A study by the Institute for Research in Higher Education found that 57 percent of developmental students who learned mathematics over a fifteen-to-twenty-year period had been exposed to at least two or more radical changes in curriculum and pedagogy, an insight into why so many students may find mathematics confusing and/or why some students have gaps in their understanding of basic mathematical conceptions (Duranczyk and Caniglia 1998). Mathematics classes that include writing assignments encourage students to reason their way through problems, and learning communities that adopt this strategy help students deepen their understanding of mathematics; other learning communities integrate mathematics with science, a combination that helps students understand how math is used in the world. “Bridge” learning communities that provide an orientation for first-year students often offer refresher workshops in mathematics so students who typically do not use the mathematics they have learned can brush up on specific math skills without having to redo a basic course.

**a) At Edmonds Community College**, one of the first community colleges campuses to offer learning communities in math/science in the nation, CheMath, links developmental math with a pre-college level chemistry course. This developmental math/science learning community has served as a model for learning communities at a number of other community colleges around the country. In a study of 539 students in college-level Chemistry, 139 were considered to be at risk based on placement scores. In this at risk population, the 62 students who had taken the CheMath learning community, who had lower placement scores than the other 77 students, still fared better: their completion rates and average GPA were higher. For more information, contact Mary O’Brien, mobrien@edcc.edu.
b) At the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), a minority-serving institution, many students are first-generation who would be considered “at risk” in higher education. The CircLES (Circle of Learning for Entering Students) program, a learning communities cluster for entering full-time science and engineering students, begins with a weeklong summer orientation with opportunities to review math skills before writing a placement assessment. In their first two semesters at UTEP, students in the CircLES program take a mathematics course, an English course, a Seminar in Critical Inquiry, and a discipline-specific course. Counselors, who are UTEP graduates from science and engineering, provide academic advising, scheduling, and career planning and mentoring. (See Section Two.)

Earning college level credit
Earning college credit and developing academic skills for entrance requirements and college-level courses at the same time is an extraordinary motivator, as Patricia Cross pointed out in Beyond the Open Door. That students do so, not as marginalized members of the academic community but as fully entitled members, is a hallmark of both some well-known and successful learning community programs and some programs in the early stages of development.

a) At De Anza College, the Learning in Communities (LinC) Program includes links, clusters, and cohorts which combine developmental classes with general education courses: “[we assume] that students who place in developmental classes are quite capable of successfully completing course work in a general education class at the same time” (Stoll 1999, 17). In fall 1998, when De Anza first experimented with linking classes in developmental and general education, it instituted a carefully documented assessment process. In the pilot developmental reading, writing, and speech communications cluster, Experiences and Expressions, 100 percent of the students completed the class, 89 percent continued their studies in the next quarter, 100 percent who took the college-level writing assessment passed, and 92 percent of the students received a “C” or better in all three classes. Collaboration between the LinC Program and an in-house staff development program ensures that the quality of learning community work continues as the program expands. Ongoing assessment is at the heart of the LinC program’s success. (See Section Two.)

b) At California State University, Hayward, the General Education First Year Cluster Program invites all entering students—including freshmen whose results from statewide mandatory English and mathematics proficiency tests identify them as “remedial students”—to choose among a number of theme-based learning community clusters for their first year of undergraduate studies. Cal State Hayward made a conscious decision not to create isolated cohorts for developmental students. Instead, the cluster coursework for each quarter includes several components that all students take, among these a discipline-based course linked to an information literacy class, speech, and
an academic success component. Only an English component offers composition classes at different developmental levels (math is offered separately from the learning community clusters). Developmental students enroll in and complete college-level, discipline-based coursework as successfully as students who are not required to take developmental writing courses. Even though more than 55 percent of entering students enroll in a developmental-level writing course—and some place in the lowest level requiring them to take a three-quarter sequence—most freshmen complete the general education composition course in their first year. (See Section Two.)

c) At Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois, entering students who place at seventh-to-ninth-grade reading levels or tenth-to-twelfth-grade reading levels are enrolled in two distinct Integrated Studies Communities (ISC). Both include a college-level transfer course that would ordinarily not be available to students who did not meet college-level reading requirements. Students that place in the lower reading courses take ISC II, which includes developmental reading and writing, an orientation to college course, and introductory speech. Students in the next level of developmental reading take ISC III that includes writing and psychology. These team-taught learning communities involve extensive coordination and integration. The success experienced by students in these ISCs since they were established in 1998 led Parkland to develop learning communities across disciplines and for students in honors programs. For more information, contact Jody Littleton, jlittleton@parkland.edu.

d) At Skagit Valley Community College, in Mount Vernon, Washington, students must successfully complete three interdisciplinary learning community combinations to meet transfer degree requirements, and learning communities for developmental students are recognized as one option. Some choices include: “The Reading-Writing Connection,” developmental reading and writing; “What’s the problem?”, developmental math and writing; and, “En Otros Terminos/In Other Words,” Spanish 101 and English Grammar. For more information, contact Lynn Dunlap, dunlap@skagit.ctc.edu.

e) At Bethune-Cookman College, in Daytona Beach, Florida, an Historically Black College and University (HBCU) that is focusing its learning community efforts on first-year students, one learning community, “From Africa to the Americas,” gives entering developmental students a jumpstart in achieving college credits. The program includes a freshman seminar, African American history, freshman English, and reading classes. For more information go to www.bethune.cookman.edu.

Assessing the impact of learning communities and collaborative learning

Vincent Tinto and his graduate students Anne Goodsell-Love and Pat Russo in 1994 did the first major study of the impact of learning communities as part of a five-year longitudinal research project on student learning in higher education.
conducted by the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment. A broad definition of student learning was used: the learning of basic knowledge in science, mathematics, and the social sciences; cognitive abilities, such as oral and written communication skills, critical thinking, and problem solving; the development of students’ values and attitudes toward learning; and progress, persistence, performance, and degree attainment (Ratcliff and Associates 1995, 4).

The Collaborative Learning Project examined the academic and social experiences of beginning students in three learning community programs: the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program at the University of Washington, the Coordinated Studies Program (CSP) at Seattle Central Community College, and the learning community clusters at LaGuardia Community College in New York. The research team sought answers to these questions: do collaborative learning programs make a difference in student learning and persistence? And, if so, how? The institutions selected for this study faced two different but common problems that affect student engagement: size in the case of the large residential university and time in the cases of the two urban community colleges. In fact, on many two-year campuses nearly two-thirds of the student body work part time and almost one-quarter are student commuters spending anywhere from six to twenty hours a week traveling to and from class (CCSSE 2002).

The researchers identified four key findings. First, a community of peers encourages class participation and continued attendance, and groups formed in class often continue to meet outside class, to socialize and to study. Second, collaborative pedagogy through team teaching and classroom activities adds an intellectual diversity and richness that encourages students’ own intellectual development and participation as one of many voices. Third, students’ academic performance and persistence increase in collaborative learning settings. Finally, collaborative learning works for commuter students and for students in big impersonal places (Tinto et al. 1993, 20-21). This study on collaborative learning broke new ground not because it ties student involvement to student attainment but because, as the researchers note

. . . it moves our conversation . . . to the practical issue of how involvement can be generated in settings where it is not easily obtained. Our research also suggests that we need to give serious attention to the argument that the attainment of the goals of enhanced student involvement and achievement is possible only when institutions alter the settings in which students are asked to learn. (21)

Learning communities were an effective way of altering the settings even in commuter schools. Others researchers would make similar observations. For instance, Grubb and associates, in a later study of learning communities in community colleges, note: “students report that they come to know their fellow students better and are able to work with them more both in and out of class—in contrast to conventional practice in community colleges, where students typically find a new group virtually every class they take” (1999, 264). A recent National Learning Communities Project monograph, Learning Community Research and
Assessment: What We Know Now, examined over 150 learning community assessment reports and research studies, and concludes that learning communities unequivocally enhance retention, persistence, student satisfaction, and achievement (Taylor, et al. 2003).

Almost a decade after the results of the Collaborative Learning Project became known, the Engaging Community Colleges (CCSSE 2002) report revealed that among the 33,500 students surveyed 15 percent of part-time and 7 percent of full-time students never worked on projects during class with their classmates. Forty-five percent of part-time and 29 percent of full-time students never worked to prepare assignments outside class, and 51 percent of part-time and 39 percent of full-time students “never discussed ideas from readings or classes with an instructor outside class” (6-9). This quantified account of student disengagement speaks to what Hill refers to as the isolation of the modern college and why learning communities need to become a mainstream practice in higher education. The companion study, the 2002 National Survey of Student Engagement indicated that involvement in learning communities was positively associated with gains on all five benchmarks of educational practice: level of academic challenge; active and collaborative learning; student interactions with faculty members; supportive campus environment; and enriching educational experience.

Friendship through scholarship

In the Tinto and associates study, a student in the University of Washington’s FIG program describes her experience in this way: “We were all learning together, but each person learns differently . . . I mean studying for tests and stuff. We helped each other . . . copying notes days we missed, dividing things up. I know that this girl and I did that a lot. Just studying for things and talking to each other about our projects” (Tinto et al. 1993, 18). In the same study a student in Seattle Central Community College’s coordinated studies program says this about her experience: “These classes incorporate into your life and into your learning. It becomes part of your thinking. It just keeps connecting, and connecting, and connecting” (19). Even students whose experience in learning communities is minimal, identify the same things in-depth research studies cite as key reasons for why learning communities work.

The language of the student quoted from the Pasadena TLC.XL program is revealing: “If you work hard, ask for help, support each other, then we’ll all make it.” Value is placed on the reciprocity associated with peer support, the means for “making it.” Most of the summer bridge students still go to the Teaching and Learning Center every day to work on their assignments in small groups or teams. On the other side of the country, a number of Fayetteville Technical Community College students credit ongoing peer support as the reason they are still in school. They, too, continue to meet although their learning community course is over. One student in that semester’s chemistry and math link offered to help students in her English class with their writing on her own time, using the learning community’s “give a helping hand up” model. These two groups of students, enrolled in developmental classes at commuter colleges,
believe they do their best work when they collaborate. Independent of faculty, they adapt the collaborative practices from their first learning community experience to other academic contexts. In both places, a network of mini-study groups is part of their student culture.

Vincent Tinto in an *AAHE Bulletin* article “Learning Communities, Collaborative Learning, and the Pedagogy of Educational Citizenship” uses the expression “learning the disposition of citizenship” (1995, 11) to describe unexpected research findings. He is surprised that students are learning citizenship through the practice of collaborative learning. Speaking of Seattle Central Community College students in particular, he notes that they “expressed a deepened appreciation for the importance of inclusive, supportive community in their lives. And they seemed to have awakened to the important notion that their own educational well-being was dependent on that of other members of the learning community, and it was in their own educational interest to be concerned with the educational needs of others” (12).

Tinto’s comment about learning the disposition of citizenship reminds us that the educational project—the one Freire speaks of where “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and each other”—is the gift access gives us. It is the promise of an embracing, yet messy, democracy.

**Endnotes**

1. This account of learning communities is drawn from National Learning Communities Project materials developed by Washington Center staff.
2. See Smith, et al. (forthcoming), or see http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu for a detailed summary of each model.
3. The phrase “friendship through scholarship” was used at a Washington State Learning Community Coordinators October 2003 meeting to describe what works for students in learning communities.
4. For more information about De Anza’s program, see www.deanza.fhda.edu/linc/.
5. Other pedagogies include the intentional fostering of community, attending to diversity, connected knowing, linking theory to practice, and reflective practice and synthesis.
6. Before coming to Evergreen, Hill, while a professor of philosophy at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, invented federated learning communities (FLC), a model which “federates” three courses around an overarching theme and an integrating seminar led by a “master learner.” This model learner, a faculty member from a discipline outside those represented in the FLC, attends all classes, does the work assigned, and helps students discover connections and contentions across the curriculum.
7. See the monograph on learning communities and diversity by Lardner (forthcoming) for an in-depth account of students’ experience.
8. Kenneth Bruffee (1986) describes the knowledge the group constructs as “a consensus arrived at for the time being by communities of knowledgeable peers” (777) in a bibliographic essay on the social construction of knowledge.
beginning with Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and including *Local Knowledge*, the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz.


10. See Smith, et al. (forthcoming) for an account of the origins of learning community work.


12. Freshman Interest Groups or FIGs are found at many research universities because the model creates oases of small academic communities in large impersonal institutional settings. Typically three courses are offered around an interdisciplinary topic or course related to a major. Each FIG is convened by a more advanced student who acts as a peer advisor. The group meets weekly to study, learn more about campus resources, and plan co-curricular activities.

13. See Section Two for a longer account of this program.

14. See http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu for a more detailed account of learning community models/diagrams.

15. After six hours of college success skills workshops—two hours of basic skills instruction in reading, mathematics, and writing plus test-taking tips—59 percent of the students improved their writing scores with 37 percent testing out of developmental writing. Sixty-seven percent improved their reading scores with 57 percent testing out of developmental reading, and 39 percent improved their mathematics scores with 7 percent testing out of developmental mathematics (Grastie 1998, 60-61).

16. Developmental educators have named SCCC’s learning community program as a best practice developmental education program (McCabe 2003).

17. From the University College U112, Critical Inquiry Handbook (2003,1) available from Barbara Jackson, bjackson@iupui.edu.

18. Entering students, initially assessed as the least able readers and writers, pass freshman composition at three times the Washington state average—60 percent compared to 21 percent. Also, students who complete their developmental program graduate at higher rates than the college average.