Overview

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Beyond the Definition of Learning Communities

This issue focuses on learning communities as models of curricular reform at urban and metropolitan colleges and universities. In choosing this focus, Executive Editor Barbara Holland and I began with a simple theme—"learning communities" for urban and metropolitan students. But if you engage in a conversation about learning communities with faculty on your own campus or at any meeting of higher education practitioners you will soon realize that there is nothing simple about them. Or log on to "learncom," a learning communities discussion list created and administered at Temple University and you'll find weekly, sometimes daily, conversations on: what *is* a learning community?

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* was designed to provide, through articles by individuals engaged in work with many aspects of learning communities, an understanding of how such communities can restructure and transform undergraduate teaching and learning experiences. Authors were invited to describe what learning communities look like and how they work: practices tested, lessons learned, and challenges overcome. Another intended element of the design was to elicit descriptions of learning communities from the different perspectives of those involved in the work—teachers, students, and partners in K-16 systemic reform.

What these articles will not offer is an "ultimate" definition of learning communities. However, our effort would be incomplete if it did not include a general discussion of the term and of the ways it is commonly applied in higher education.

Definitions and Models

The number of learning communities programs and the attention given to them in the literature and at higher education conferences have increased steadily in recent years, but the principles behind them have strong historical roots. The work of John Dewey, Alexander Meiklejohn, and Joseph Tussman are often cited in discussions of the theoretical foundations for learning communities.

The first definition I encountered came from the well-known monograph *Learning Communities: Creating Connections among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*: "A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding of and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise" (Gabelnick,

MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990, p. 19). This definition guides the learning communities initiative on my campus, with the importance of curricular structures, integration, and interaction especially emphasized.

Other campuses base their work on the perspective of Alexander Astin, who recommends organizing students into small groups—learning communities—to help overcome feelings of isolation common on large campuses. "Such communities can be organized along curricular lines, common career interests, avocational interests, residential living areas, and so on. These can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness; to encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences; and to counteract the isolation that many students feel" (Astin, 1985, p. 161). This broader definition recognizes that learning occurs both in and out of the classroom, and in a variety of settings.

In a chapter in an upcoming monograph on learning communities published by the National Center for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Anne Goodsell Love (in press) writes of a "common understanding" of the term and cites a brochure announcing a national conference on learning communities sponsored in January 1998 at the University of Miami: "...center(s) on a vision of faculty and students—and sometimes administrators, staff, and the larger community—working collaboratively toward shared, significant academic goals in environments in which competition, if not absent, is at least de-emphasized. In a learning community, both faculty and students have the opportunity and the responsibility to learn from and help teach each other." This definition captures an important characteristic of successful learning communities programs: cross-campus partnerships built to support teaching and learning.

In the literature and in national discussion, there is an emerging debate about what constitutes a "learning community." In their 1990 monograph, Gabelnick et al. discuss five models: linked courses, clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies. These authors have recently condensed their number of models to three: paired or clustered courses, student cohorts in larger classes, and team-taught programs. The models all involve cohorts of students enrolled in common courses, but differ in how the basic unit of instruction and the role of faculty are defined.

Paired or clustered courses. In the simplest of the models—linked courses—cohorts of students enroll in two courses. One is usually a content course, while the other is often a first-year writing or skills course. The extent to which the faculty coordinate their linked courses varies from pair to pair. The cluster model is an expanded linked-course approach that usually involves three or four discretely taught courses linked by a common theme. The "community" constitutes the majority of a student's coursework in a given quarter or semester.

Cohorts in larger classes. The freshman interest group (FIG) is a model considered best suited for large institutions. In FIGS, small cohorts of students are placed in sections of two or three lecture courses and meet weekly as a small group in a seminar. There is little to no coordination among faculty teaching the FIG

lecture courses, but the FIG seminar, which is often peer-led, provides an opportunity for students to build connections in what they are learning.

Team-taught programs. The most radical models in terms of curricular reform and faculty roles are federated learning communities and coordinated studies programs. In the former, cohorts of students are joined by a faculty "master learner" in a cluster of thematically-linked courses. The faculty member participates as a learner in all courses in the community, and usually facilitates a seminar to help students process what they are learning. Coordinated studies programs involve small cohorts of students and faculty from several disciplines in interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

Goodsell Love and Tokuno (in press) offer a dimensions approach to models of learning communities. They offer five dimensions on which to develop and rank (low to high) such programs: student collaboration, faculty collaboration, curricular coordination, shared setting (facilities or resources shared by community members), and interactive pedagogy. The intent is to expand the possible configurations of learning communities to allow campuses greater flexibility in creating campus-specific models appropriate to the needs of their institutions.

For example, campuses that place a high value on bringing students and faculty together both in and out of the classroom may want to physically locate their learning communities program in some dedicated classroom and gathering space. However, on urban campuses where space is often at a premium, a model ranked low to middle on shared setting could achieve high levels of student/faculty collaboration by intentionally structuring learning activities (group projects, field trips) that bring the groups together.

Restructuring to Promote Student Learning

Why do campuses build learning communities into their existing undergraduate curriculums or install them as the centerpiece of undergraduate curricular reform efforts? For some campuses it is a means to a crucial end: improved student achievement and increased retention rates. Other campuses look to learning communities to change students' attitudes toward the university and the learning experience. On some campuses the work is connected to faculty development and efforts to change the way we teach undergraduates, particularly first-year students. For most of us considering or engaged in learning communities work, it is a resounding "all of the above."

The literature supports the "learning communities call" to more actively involve students and faculty as partners in the learning enterprise. We talk about wanting students to learn from each other and their teachers in more participatory and meaningful ways; however, most college classrooms—the physical layout and the time students spend in them—promote what Jean MacGregor (1990) refers to as the "transmission model of college teaching and learning" (p. 28). In learning communities classrooms, knowledge flows in many directions: student to student, student to teacher, teacher to student, and teacher to teacher.

Learning communities allow us to reorganize the college classroom to promote student learning. In a recent article in *AAHE Bulletin*, Peter Ewell (1997) asks us to consider what we know about learning. Ewell says that "learning is about making meaning for each individual learner by establishing and reworking patterns,

relationships, and connections" (p. 4). Students learn best when they can make sense of what they are learning. Taken as discrete courses, the only connection between college math and introduction to psychology is that both courses satisfy graduation requirements. But when the courses are linked as a learning community, the math teacher can use psychology journals as the context for studying statistical applications. Students gain a deeper understanding of the relationship of math to other disciplines and both the math and psychology instructors cover important units of instruction.

According to Ewell, approaches that emphasize interpersonal collaboration are most likely to promote learning. Learning communities, by providing for greater interaction among students, their peers, and teachers, allow students to build the support relationships that they need to succeed in college and beyond. A critical relationship is the one forged between students and their teachers.

In his often cited study, *What Matters in College*, Alexander Astin (1993) discusses undergraduate student development and the impact of different variables in the college environment on it. One important measure is "student orientation of the faculty." Student orientation of the faculty is defined as the extent to which faculty are interested and involved in student development. It will come as no surprise to the readers of this journal that public universities score low on this measure. Students do not perceive their faculty as interested in or available to assist them with problems. By design, learning communities can increase the quantity and *quality* of faculty involvement with students.

Urban and metropolitan colleges and universities face unique challenges in their efforts to create more collaborative learning environments. Our students are older and more diverse. The majority commute to campus and work while attending college. And with more and more students working an increasing number of hours, never has the need been more pressing for campuses to make the most of the time undergraduates spend on campus. Students do not come to college seeking the meaning of life. They see a college degree as a means to an end: to get a better job and make more money. They spend less time on campus, in some instances only two or three days a week. They look directly at us and pose the following challenge: "I am willing to spend 12 to 15 hours a week on your campus (even if they are attending college full-time). During that time I expect you to teach me, develop me, advise me, and train me."

Many campuses, including those represented here, are beginning to meet these challenges through use of learning communities. With the classroom as the "home base," learning communities are providing students with opportunities for increased interaction with their peers and teachers, greater campus and community involvement, and enhanced academic support. Students are learning in more meaningful ways and at the same time building important connections to the university.

This Issue

The articles in this issue go beyond theory and definitions, and focus on the challenges of building and sustaining learning communities programs. The campuses represented have developed approaches to learning communities that meet the unique

needs of their students, faculty, and organizational culture. The authors are practitioners—faculty, academic administrators, institutional researchers—who are or were engaged in the work of institutionalizing learning communities at metropolitan colleges and universities. Taken individually, each article offers an example of how one campus or network of institutions structured and institutionalized learning communities to improve undergraduate education. Collectively, they provide a general understanding of the characteristics of learning communities, and the guiding principles behind them and undergraduate curricular reform.

What are the common elements shared by these programs? First, and perhaps central to success, is the role of faculty. Learning communities models seek to move faculty beyond the roles of lecturers or teachers toward roles as mentors and guides. The programs described here ask faculty to rethink the way they teach. These learning communities initiatives promote interdisciplinary teaching partnerships and campus-wide conversations on teaching and learning. In "Creating Community among Teachers: Uniting Program and Department in Learning Communities Faculty Development," Daniel Tompkins and Rodney Mader describe faculty development activities for the full-time faculty and graduate students who teach in learning communities at Temple University.

Enhancing the quality and quantity of student interaction with their faculty and peers is another central principle defining the work of learning communities. Greater student involvement in learning, and increased interaction with faculty and peers, is not easy to achieve at urban colleges and universities comprised primarily of commuting students. The programs described in this issue involve both commuting and residential student populations, but emphasize student-student and student-faculty interaction at the center of the curricular experience. Nancy Shapiro's article, "Learning Communities: Moving Beyond Classroom Walls" discusses how the University of Maryland's College Park Scholars Program uses experiential and service learning to help students build not only connections to each other and their faculty, but also to the surrounding metropolitan Washington-Baltimore community.

Learning communities also represent ways to create partnerships for student learning that extend across campus. In their article, "Learning Communities: An Instructional Team Approach," Scott Evenbeck and Gayle Williams describe ways in which a teaching team consisting of a faculty member, academic adviser, librarian, student mentor, and technical support person introduces students to the informational and support resources necessary to succeed in college.

On many campuses, learning communities are at the heart of systemic undergraduate education reform. Nancy Hoffman's article, "Learning Communities, High Schools and School Reform," examines uses of learning communities on a K-16 level and how these are involved in the reform agenda of two urban school districts and their higher education partners. One of those partners is Portland State University, whose initiative extends vertically through their undergraduate curriculum. In his article, "Building Communities into the Mainstream of the Curriculum," Charles White addresses the need for urban universities to integrate instructional

strategies that link students, faculty, and disciplines into a logical curricular design that constantly reinforces a sense of community.

Another element shared by the programs described is the relationship between learning communities efforts and internal or external demands for increased accountability in undergraduate education. From state boards to accrediting bodies, from campus administrations to the K-12 community, universities are facing increasing pressure not only to demonstrate what undergraduates learn, but to provide evidence that they are learning in meaningful ways. Valarie Arms' article, "A Learning Community for Professionals: The New Engineering Curriculum," describes the relationship between the new engineering curriculum at Drexel University and the Criteria 2000 standards of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET).

A final shared element of these programs is the evidence of how learning communities work. What is the impact on students? On faculty? On the institution? Victor Borden and Patrick Rooney's article, "Evaluating and Assessing Learning Communities," describes efforts at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis to assess its learning communities program.

In creating this issue, the editors and authors functioned very much like a learning community. We collaborated in small groups to discuss our overall goals for the issue and the objectives for the contributed articles. We wanted the writing process to be both a teaching and a learning experience. I want to thank the authors who shared their learning communities work and gave me much to consider as my colleagues and I continue to build and shape the Learning Communities Program at Temple University. I owe a special thanks to Barbara Holland for this opportunity and for her guidance and vision in shaping this work. One of our goals was to add to the national conversation on the potential for learning communities as models of undergraduate education reform. We invite you to continue the conversation with our authors and on your campuses.

Suggested Readings

Astin, A.W. *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

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Goodsell Love, A. "What are Learning Communities?" in *Learning Communities: New Structures, New Partnerships for Learning*, ed. J. Levine (Columbia, SC: National Center for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition, in press).

Goodsell Love, A. and Tokuno, K. "Learning Community Models," in *Learning Communities: New Structures, New Partnerships for Learning*, ed. J. Levine (Columbia, SC: National Center for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition, in press).

MacGregor, J., "Collaborative Learning: Shared Inquiry as a Process of Reform," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning 42.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).