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Urban and metropolitan students often experience a traditionally organized curriculum as a series of disconnected course requirements. Portland State found that integrating attention to community-building as a central element of the core curriculum strengthened student and faculty affiliations and improved persistence rates.

Placing Community-Building at the Center of the Curriculum

The simple observation that students learn better in community with other students, even though learning is an individual activity, has provided the core premise for major curricular reform on several campuses (Gaff, 1991). On urban campuses, there are many factors that impinge on student access to higher education and mitigate against community connection and affiliation with the university. Urban institutions often do not include the structures and experiences that are traditionally used to build community and affiliation. For example, very few, if any, students live on campus, and co-curricular activities are valued by only a small percentage of students .

For urban institutions, it is the classroom and the curriculum that provide opportunities to build a sense of community and affiliation. Learning community structures provide a means for these campuses to respond to the learning needs of the very broad range of students attending such institutions by providing integrated educational experiences intentionally designed to build community and connections.

One need only review any recent issue of *Change Magazine*, *Liberal Education*, or the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to find a focus on the challenges posed by the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered education. Emphasis on the undergraduate experience and student learning has fostered several new curricular and pedagogical

strategies to improve both. Active learning, community-based or service learning, problem-based learning, and collaborative learning are some of the major initiatives that have been widely discussed and less widely implemented at a variety of institutions. The challenge for all institutions, and especially for urban ones, is to devise a curricular structure within which these new approaches can be placed at the center of the student experience. The implementation of learning communities, which intentionally build community and as a result improve student learning, is one curricular approach that presents special dialogues in urban settings.

Other contributions to this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* explore structures and models of learning communities in more detail. This article first focuses on the characteristics of the student populations of urban universities and how these contribute to the absence of community. The next section explores how learning communities contribute to the opportunity to engage students in a range of learning experiences designed to enhance attainment. The concluding section briefly describes the experience of Portland State University (PSU), which has made large-scale curricular changes meant to build a sense of community into the student experience and to improve learning outcomes.

Building Models in the Midst of Complexity

For urban and metropolitan campuses, student attachment to the institution and a sense of affiliation with other students are not necessarily inherent attributes of the student experience. There are two principal characteristics of this student population that mitigate against natural or easily constructed institutional communities. First, students are usually attempting to access higher education within the context of complex personal lives. Second, because metropolitan institutions make specific commitments to community responsiveness and access as part of their institutional missions, the student population often includes a complex mix of age, race, ethnicity, intentions, goals, outside obligations, and prior academic preparation. These dimensions tend to separate rather than bind students who often do not spend much time on campus. These are compounded by the reality that urban campuses typically have few, if any, residential facilities. Community building strategies that rely on models created for relatively homogeneous and residential student populations are simply inappropriate and doomed to fail with an urban student body. Thus, efforts to build affiliation and community must be centered in the classroom.

The demographic profiles of metropolitan/urban student populations include some or all of the following:

- A high percentage of first generation students
- Many entering freshmen and transfers with a broad range of prior academic experiences and preparation
- A high percentage of returning and older students
- A substantial proportion of the student population who began their higher education at a different institution

- A majority of students who reside off-campus, commute to class, and have no on-campus "place"
- A large number of students who work half-time or more, with a majority holding jobs off-campus
- Numerous students who attend part-time and take more than six years to complete their degrees

While this listing is commonly used to describe nontraditional student populations, it misses other equally important attributes. At PSU, some 35,000+ students take coursework annually, yet the full-time equivalent is 14,750 (about 2/3 of whom are undergraduates). These erratic patterns of attendance make it problematic for the institution to create a bond with a student. Many enter the institution intending to transfer after one or two years; others access courses or programs with no intention of seeking a degree. Another group of students enroll at both PSU and area community colleges simultaneously in an effort to save time and money. Each of these factors points to the reality that many students have learned to take advantage of the variety of higher education opportunities available to them in metropolitan areas. In turn, this challenges metropolitan institutions to design and deliver the curriculum in ways that are responsive to the characteristics of the student population, while also ensuring academic excellence.

This core challenge is further complicated by the distinctions between entering first-time freshmen and transfer students. At Portland State entering freshmen average slightly less than 19 years of age and bring with them the transition issues typically found for new freshmen in any institution. The primary distinction is that most of these students work and few live on campus. Building friendships, establishing positive relations with faculty, and placing the institution at the center of their daily lives are difficult at best. In surveys taken prior to the reform of our core curriculum, students reported a great deal of difficulty in establishing peer relationships, even after two or three terms, and a relatively low percentage indicated that they had established connections with faculty .

Most urban institutions also serve large numbers of transfer students. At PSU, about twice as many transfer students as freshmen enter the institution each year and their average age is 24. Transfer students have in common only that they have attended another institution prior to enrolling at PSU. One study identified 72 different transfer patterns between regional community colleges and Portland State, and these account for about one-half of the entering transfers (Kinnick, 1995). The other half of the transfer students enter after attending another four-year institution, coming from hundreds of other institutions and entering at all levels of the curriculum. Our experience is that the prior academic preparation and accomplishments of these students are more varied and cover a broader range than is the case for entering freshmen.

Prior to the implementation of a learning community strategy within the required curriculum, students reported that their general experience of the institution was that they would drive to campus, search for a parking place, attend classes in

which they often knew very few if any colleagues, leave class, and commute to home or work. Meeting complex demands and obligations outside the university consumed much of their time and attention. Yet many, especially freshmen, indicated a yearning for a more sustained campus experience and a sense of community with other students and with faculty.

Given these generic descriptions of urban and metropolitan students, it is no surprise that these campuses usually experience lower fall-to-fall retention rates for first-time freshmen and lower six-year graduation rates than do their residential campus counterparts. The proposed remedy is to establish the institution as a central part of the daily lives of students (connection) and to help them find a basis for affiliation with other students and the faculty (community) within a context of diversity and complexity. The core premise is that learning is enhanced within the context of community. We know that the entire student experience is enhanced when students have connections with each other and the institution, rather than anonymously and separately seeking their educational goals.

Community and Learning

The relationship of connection and affiliation to learning has been powerfully argued in the research of Alexander Astin, whose study, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* (1993), is replete with evidence pointing to the importance of community for enhancing student learning and the student experience. In a 1992 article Astin had summarized his key findings by identifying factors with positive and negative effects on general education outcomes, and those factors found to have a negative relationship with general education learning outcomes are familiar to those who have taught, supported, and advised urban or metropolitan students (Astin, 1992, p. 36):

- Living at home; commuting
- Lack of community among students
- Full-time employment; off-campus employment
- Watching television
- Large institutional size
- Frequent use of teaching assistants

The list of factors found to have positive associations with general education learning outcomes lends further support to the importance of affiliation and connection for learning (Astin, 1992, p. 30):

- Student-student interaction
- Student-faculty interaction
- A faculty that is very student-oriented
- Discussing racial/ethnic issues with other students
- Hours devoted to studying
- Tutoring other students
- An institutional emphasis on diversity

The evidence is striking. Students learn better when there is a sense of community, when they interact with each other and with faculty, when they spend more time on campus, and when they feel connected to the campus. For urban

institutions it is the curriculum and its delivery in the classroom that offers the primary locus for change intended to improve community and learning.

Learning Communities and Pedagogical Change

Learning communities have been among the more prominent of the reform efforts during the past decade, which have included other significant curricular and pedagogical motivations as higher education has struggled to respond to external criticism regarding the education received by undergraduates. The often negative perceptions, real or not, of the performance of higher education by public constituencies, and the increased competition from a variety of alternative education providers, have heightened a sense of disequilibrium within higher education. Within this period of transformation of the higher education landscape, curricular reform has become a key strategy for many institutions. Learning communities may prove to be a means to accomplish affiliation and connection while also supporting the introduction of other new learning strategies.

In their influential review of the contemporary understanding of liberal education, Carol Geary Schneider and Robert Shoenberg (1998) mark the fundamental shift in the teaching role of faculty that has been critical to the reform movement.

> Presentational teaching as the quintessential activity of the college professor is retreating before a growing emphasis on the centrality of the student as learner. In this newer conception, the instructor's role as motivator remains fundamental, but now as a mentor in acquiring strategies for learning (p. 9).

In his recent contribution to an examination of liberal learning, Thomas Erlich (1997) groups the several emergent strategies for improving undergraduate learning into four categories

> . . . community-service learning, as opposed to closed classroom learning; problem-based learning, as opposed to discipline-based learning; collaborative learning, as opposed to individual learning; and the use of interactive technology, as opposed to chalkboards (p. 237).

Schneider and Shoenberg similarly group curriculum and instructional practices while adding:

> Integrative learning: generating links among previously unconnected issues, approaches, sources of knowledge, and/or contexts for practice. Such learning is often multidisciplinary. Increasingly it occurs in the context of learning communities or thematically linked courses. The instructor serves as exemplar of the person whose role is to find fresh and instructive connections, helping students learn how to test intellectual and practical usefulness—the explanatory power—of the connections they find. Faculty members teaching linked courses work together to design curricular frameworks and materials that facilitate integrative inquiry and learning (p. 10).

As higher education moves to respond to renew attention to the quality of undergraduate education, a core question is how to adapt existing educational structures to improve learning through the introduction of new practices such as those described above. Using learning communities as a framework at the center of the core or general education curriculum provides the opportunity to address intentionally issues of student affiliation and connection while also employing interactive technology, community-based learning, collaborative learning pedagogies, and problem-based learning.

It is the experience of several institutions, including Portland State University, that learning community structures provide an organizational context within which a range of learning strategies can be implemented while concurrently building student community and connection with the institution. While it is certainly the case that several of the new strategies can be implemented in class situations other than learning communities, both the logic of such communities and the experience of urban and metropolitan universities indicate that the goals of building community and improving learning are closely intertwined.

The Portland State Experience

The model followed at Portland State University differs from other learning community approaches in that courses for entering students are developed by multidisciplinary teams of faculty as the first year of a new, structured approach to general education, termed Freshman Inquiry, in the University Studies program. After Freshman Inquiry, students continue through Sophomore Inquiry, Junior Course Clusters, and a Senior Capstone course. Strategies to provide student-student and student-faculty affiliations permeate the University Studies program. All entering freshmen are required to complete Freshman Inquiry, which is a year-long course where approximately 35 students meet together as the main class and then separately in smaller groups (12-13 students) led by an upper-division or graduate student mentor. While completing Freshman Inquiry, students also take other departmental introductory courses.

Faculty from different disciplines build the Freshman Inquiry curriculum around a thematic base (i.e., Einstein's universe; conflict and values; the city) and themselves form a community through the insights provided by different disciplinary perspectives. Throughout the year activities are designed that intentionally seek to build student-student and faculty-student interaction. These courses provide instruction through a mix of pedagogical approaches, including collaborative learning and interactive technology. Most students are also expected to complete projects that involve them with the external community of the city.

A defining feature is that the courses emphasize academic foundations (writing, oral communication, basic statistics, technology literacy, visual and graphics communication) in an integrated manner. A single project may ask students, individually and in teams, to gather and analyze data, report and display the results, and present their findings in written and oral form. Students work closely with faculty and their peer mentor, and the curriculum is adjusted to respond to student achievement and expecta-

tions. The constant sharing of work with peers and the functioning of faculty as motivators, guides, and instructors results in the creation of strong classroom communities.

We have found that the relationships built during this experience continue into subsequent years, even as students pursue a variety of different majors. Students indicate that Freshman Inquiry provides a place where they are known by name by their colleagues and faculty, and where students coming from a variety of backgrounds forge lasting associations. They also report that this experience contrasts with other classes in which they might not know the persons sitting next to them.

Implemented in 1994, some of the first freshmen in the University Studies program are now seniors. Early indications are that placing intentional community-building at the center of the curriculum is resulting in increasing rates of retention for first-time freshmen. The trend shows about a five percent improvement in the first year and a similar result for the second year. The data also suggest some improvement in the overall academic performance of the first two cohorts compared to previous freshman cohorts, although it is too early to draw any definitive conclusions. More importantly, focus group information indicates that students placed a high value on the community they experienced in their Freshman Inquiry classes.

Transfer students entering the university pose a different and much more complex set of issues. Previous surveys found that transfer students often had difficulty establishing connections with student colleagues and with faculty, resulting in considerable dissonance in their connections with the university. Given the new curricular environment of University Studies, it was even more important that we deliberately prepare transfer students to succeed at PSU. Portland State has developed a one-term transfer transition course based on the Freshman Inquiry model, a course that continues to evolve as we learn more about the needs of these students. Nonetheless, the importance of the community established within the course has been a consistent finding. For urban institutions with large numbers of transfer students, the establishment of curricula that build affiliation and connection that also acknowledging the diversity of prior experiences remains an issue that has not yet become the center of discussions about reform of undergraduate education.

Community as an Urban Imperative

Urban institutions are often defined pejoratively as "commuter schools." The clear implication is that students are missing something important in their higher education, something presumed to be present at residential campuses. Students connect with urban universities primarily through time in the classroom, and the focus of their daily lives pulls them away from closer involvement with the campus. Anonymity rather than affiliation and isolation rather than shared community often define the experience of entering students.

Urban institutions cannot change the external contexts of the students, but they can address the social need for community. Beginning with the focus on the classroom, learning communities provide urban institutions with a strategy to improve learning and connect students with each other and with the institution. It is in the context of community that other strategies for improved learning will be most effective.

Suggested Readings

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

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Erlich, T., "Dewey versus Hutchins: The Next Round." in *Education and Democracy: Re-imagining Liberal Learning in America,* ed. Robert Orrill (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1997) 225-262.

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