



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Learning Communities

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I am really glad I registered for a learning community (despite having to get up early). I wish I could do it again. It really helped my transition into my freshman year. The group really did become a community. If you don't already, you should make learning communities available throughout one's collegiate career.

—First-year student

Learning communities—clusters of courses organized around a curricular theme that students take as a group—strengthen and enrich students' connections to each other, their teachers, and the subject matter they are studying. They also challenge first-year students to redefine their educational goals in broader terms and provide the support for doing so. More and more campuses across a variety of institutional types are exploring or implementing curricular learning communities to create a more coherent and connected curriculum, promote student success, and create community, particularly for first-year students.

A National Survey of First-Year Curricular Practices conducted by the Policy Center on the First Year of College (2001) showed the pervasiveness of learning communities in higher education, particularly among research institutions. According to the survey, about 75 percent of the research-extensive institutions that responded reported offering learning communities. Carnegie-classified master's institutions reported use of learning communities to be nearly 40 percent, and research-intensive institutions reported use of learning communities at just under 40 percent. Associate degree-granting institutions that participated in the survey reported use of learning communities to be over 20 percent, and baccalaureate colleges reported use of learning communities to be approximately 18 percent.

For the first-year student, learning communities offer an introduction to the academic and social life of an institution. Programs such as learning communities that organize students into smaller communities have a positive impact on student learning, satisfaction, persistence, and graduation rates. From within

smaller communities, students are more likely to develop personal connections to the larger campus community.

After a brief review of the literature that highlights the benefits of organizing students, teachers, and courses in this way, this chapter provides an overview of definitions, characteristics, and models of learning communities, illustrated by examples of successful programs, including those designed for unique populations of first-year students. Practical advice for implementing and assessing learning communities is also provided.

WHAT IS A LEARNING COMMUNITY?

The term *learning community* is currently applied in different ways across diverse contexts. In higher education, it may be used to describe individual classrooms, curricular learning communities, living-learning communities, on-line learning communities, or faculty learning communities. From an organizational development perspective, as in the work of Senge (1994) and other system theorists, the term is often used to describe organizations as "learning communities." "Learning communities" also describes community development: "Cities and towns with the capacity to learn from their own experience to become more healthy and sustainable places to live and work" (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2001).

This chapter focuses on curricular learning communities as a model for promoting first-year student success. Curricular learning communities are defined as "a variety of approaches that link or cluster classes during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, 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 among disciplines" (Macgregor et al., 2001).

WHY LEARNING COMMUNITIES?

Learning communities are certainly not a new trend or best practice fad. They have strong roots in the work of John Dewey, Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin, Joseph Tussman's experience at Berkeley, the innovation of Patrick Hill at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and the vision of the founding faculty of The Evergreen State College in Washington state (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Dewey advocated for learning environments characterized by cooperative and collaborative approaches to learning, and he defined education as an ongoing process of reorganization, reconstruction, and transformation. Meiklejohn and Tussman's efforts are early examples of undergraduate learning communities that offered an alternative to the fragmented and incoherent curriculum students typically experienced.

In the past fifteen years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of campuses installing learning communities. The scholarship of Alexander Astin (1993), Vincent Tinto (1993), Peter Ewell (1997), Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini (1991), and others teaches us a great deal about student success, student development, and good practice in higher education. The literature also helps explain how learning communities as a curricular structure can support students' intellectual, personal, and social growth while in college.

In his study of what matters in college, Astin (1993) discusses the types of teaching and academic behaviors that have a positive impact on student development: frequent student-faculty interaction, frequent student-student interaction, and time devoted to studying, tutoring, cooperative learning, and giving class presentations. Learning communities create the type of environment for success that Astin describes and by design promote deeper learning. Learners create their learning actively and uniquely; they are not empty vessels into which knowledge can be poured (Ewell, 1997). Learning is about making meaning, and students learn constantly—with us and without us. Direct experience has an impact on students' understanding, with students learning most effectively in the context of a compelling problem. Learning also requires reflection and is most likely to occur in a supportive environment characterized by personal support and interaction with others (p. 4). Learning communities are characterized by interpersonal collaboration, the application of concepts to real situations, rich and frequent feedback on performance, and a curriculum that emphasizes experience and cross-disciplinary learning—all, according to Ewell (1997), characteristics of effective approaches to learning.

HOW LEARNING COMMUNITIES AFFECT STUDENTS, FACULTY, AND INSTITUTIONS

Several studies indicate that participation in learning communities has a positive impact on student achievement and retention (Tinto, Goodsell Love, and Russo, 1993b). A Temple University study revealed that learning communities participants were retained to the second fall semester at rates 5 to 9 percent higher than comparison groups of nonparticipants (Temple University Retention Study, http://www.temple.edu/university_studies/reports.html). Researchers at the University of Missouri-Columbia studied students' academic records to determine if participation in freshman interest groups (FIGs) was associated with higher levels of academic achievement and persistence. Before and after controlling for entering ability, freshman students in the FIG cohort earned a higher mean grade point average than nonparticipants. A longitudinal retention study for the same group demonstrated a 12 percent higher retention rate for FIG members after three years (Student Life Studies Abstracts, 1996).

Participation in learning communities also has a positive effect on first-year students' intellectual and social development. Researchers working with the

QUANTA Interdisciplinary Learning Communities Program at Daytona Beach Community College measured students' cognitive development using the Measure of Intellectual Development (MID), an instrument that applies Perry's Scheme of Intellectual Development. Student essays were compared over the course of the academic year to determine if learning community participants showed movement along the Perry Scale. The majority of these first-year students showed at least a change of one-third position, and when the QUANTA results were compared to findings from a study of national norms, learning communities participants showed greater growth and development than students in traditional classes (Avens & Zelle, 1992).

Studies also reveal that learning communities help first-year students adapt more quickly to the college classroom environment. They are more likely to participate in class discussions, raise questions, and seek an instructor's assistance than nonparticipants. They report greater satisfaction with their classes and teachers and are also more likely to participate in a range of academic and social activities (Tinto, Goodsell Love, and Russo, 1993b; Reumann-Moore, El-Haj, & Gold, 1997). An end-of-year survey conducted by the Russell Scholar's Program at the University of Southern Maine revealed that program participants spent more time participating in organized activities and talking informally with other students than nonparticipants did (Johnson & King, 1996). At the University of Wisconsin, first-year students in the Bradley Learning Community reported greater satisfaction with the first year and greater participation in the university's opening of the school year activities than nonparticipants. Learning communities participants were also more likely to become orientation leaders (Brower, 1997).

Research (Avens & Zelle, 1992; Reumann-Moore et al., 1997) on student perceptions of the learning communities experience shows that first-year students value the interdisciplinary nature of learning communities courses, the emphasis on the development of certain academic and interpersonal skills, and the interactions between teachers and students. According to one student, "My learning community experiences helped me to adjust to college and meet other people in my major. This way if I had a question or problem, I could always count on someone in my class for help."

For faculty, participation in learning communities typically leads to greater attention to pedagogy and enhanced collegiality across disciplines. Many faculty report that as part of a learning community, they change their teaching practices or philosophy toward teaching and learning in some manner (Reumann-Moore et al., 1997). Learning communities faculty report greater use of group work or collaborative learning strategies in their classrooms. Faculty also report more out-of-class contact with students and an increased awareness of students' academic and personal needs. According to one learning community teacher, the learning community experience helped her become more aware of students' out-of-classroom commitments and pressures, such as jobs and financial concerns. "I am more understanding of students as I teach them, not that I let them turn in papers late, but I've gained more of a student perspective" (Reumann-Moore et al., 1997, p. 31).

Faculty do raise some concerns about teaching in learning communities. Some caution that the learning communities atmosphere can resemble that of high school, with faculty often investing time in helping students with the socialization process of becoming a college student. Faculty development workshops are a good setting to discuss this "grade 13 dynamic" and to introduce strategies that can help faculty support students in the transition to college learning without compromising curriculum or content teaching time. Another barrier that faculty face is the time required to prepare integrated or interdisciplinary learning experiences for students. Where possible, learning communities program leadership should provide support for faculty teaching teams to meet prior to and during the semester in which they are teaching in a community. Most important, the faculty reward structure should reflect the time and commitment necessary to teach successfully in a learning community environment.

The impact of learning communities reaches beyond first-year students and faculty and leads to institutional transformation as well. For a campus, the implementation of learning communities leads to increased opportunities for cross-department collaboration and for partnerships between units, such as academic affairs and student affairs. In addition, the process of implementing and sustaining learning communities typically leads to increased attention to—and resources for—teaching, learning, assessment, and student support.

CURRICULAR LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning communities aim to promote community, curricular connections, collaboration, and reflective practice and synthesis (MacGregor et al., 2001). Although definitions may vary, learning communities programs share several basic characteristics. First, they organize students and faculty into groups that tend to be smaller than other campus units (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 1997). This is accomplished through coenrollment in a defined set of curricular offerings, an essential characteristic of learning communities. Second, learning communities encourage integration of the curriculum. They effectively address fragmentation in the curriculum, particularly within general education (Goodsell Love, 1999), and they allow faculty to teach and students to learn in more interdisciplinary, intellectually stimulating, and challenging ways. Third, learning communities bring small groups of students together in the classroom, making it easier for students to establish academic and social support networks inside and outside the classroom. This is particularly important for first-year students.

Learning communities help first-year students become socialized to what it means to be college students, particularly when the pairing or cluster includes a first-year seminar or small group discussion session. Learning communities located within first-year experience programs often link academic, discipline-based courses to new or existing first-year experience courses or first-year seminars. This provides an ideal setting in which to introduce students to the

expectations of the college classroom, while student interaction with peers reinforces the attitudes, values, and behaviors necessary to succeed as a member of the peer group. Students recognize the need for this type of support: "I made a very good choice to enroll in a learning community. It helped ease my transition from high school to college."

One approach to structuring a learning community experience that introduces students to the campus experience in and beyond the classroom is the use of instructional teams. Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) relies on an instructional team approach in the teaching of its learning communities. "An Instructional Team is a collaborative effort led by a member of the teaching faculty with a librarian, a technologist, a counselor, and a student mentor (and any other pedagogical and/or evaluation specialist as needs may dictate)" (<http://uc.iupui.edu/LC/>). Team members work together on course design, implementation, and assessment.

Learning communities focus faculty and students on learning outcomes (Tinto et al., 1993b). As curricular structures, they move campuses from an emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on teaching and learning. Within teaching teams, learning communities faculty discuss their goals for the community and for student success, including plans for assessing student learning. Learning communities provide a setting for community-based delivery of student support services such as academic advising, career mentoring, or tutoring. Academic advising and career planning can be a focus of a linked seminar, and Supplemental Instruction or tutoring can be made available to students in the community. By making such resources readily available, learning communities help first-year students become accustomed to regularly using such supports (Reumann-Moore et al., 1997).

The University of Oregon involves academic advisers in the instructional delivery of its FIG program. An academic adviser or faculty member teaches the one-credit College Experience course included in the community. When faculty members teach the courses, advisers work with them to design and facilitate the academic planning unit (Bennett, 1999). This introduces first-year students in learning communities to academic advising and other support services and helps them recognize the value of such services to their success.

Finally, learning communities become a critical lens for examining the first year. While implementing learning communities, campuses often learn a great deal about how students move through the curriculum, use academic support resources, or perceive programs and services such as orientation, placement testing, residence hall programming, academic advising, and student activities.

DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning communities can be described as having five dimensions: (1) student collaboration, (2) faculty collaboration, (3) curricular coordination, (4) shared setting, and (5) interactive pedagogy (Goodsell Love & Tokuno, 1999). The first,

student collaboration, describes how students are organized and the various opportunities they use to get to know each other and collaborate around learning tasks. Learning communities students can connect in the classroom through collaborative learning and group projects, and outside the class through field trips or electronic means such as e-mail, listservs, and discussion boards.

Faculty collaboration is the extent to which faculty interact around issues of teaching and learning. Learning communities faculty who meet regularly to discuss curriculum planning or student progress would rank high on this dimension. Regularly scheduled faculty development activities—opportunities for those teaching in learning communities to come together to discuss pedagogy, student learning, and classroom assessment—is essential to achieving faculty collaboration in and across learning communities. Curricular coordination describes level of curricular integration. While courses that are individually taught with virtually no integration demonstrate low levels of coordination, learning communities in which academic content is taught from interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary perspectives rank high on this scale.

The fourth dimension, shared setting, describes the physical space in which teaching and learning occurs—classrooms, student lounges, computer labs, and other places on campus. The final dimension, interactive pedagogy, describes how the curriculum is delivered and shared across the community. A lecture format represents lower levels of interaction, while classrooms characterized by more active pedagogies—collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and experiential learning—are considered highly interactive.

Programs vary according to their approach to learning communities, location of the program in the undergraduate curriculum, and size of the initiative. Learning communities are found in first-year experience programs, general education, writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives, and the major or minor. Campuses are creating learning communities for different student populations from developmental studies to honors programs to students in math, science, and engineering programs. Most recently, many campuses are placing learning communities at the center of the first-year experience.

LEARNING COMMUNITY MODELS

Learning communities take different shapes as they are installed in undergraduate programs across different institutional types. Four common approaches are discussed here: paired or clustered courses, cohorts in large courses or FIGs, team-taught programs, and residence-based learning communities, models that intentionally link the classroom-based learning community with a residential life component.

Paired or Clustered Courses

Paired- or clustered-course learning communities link individually taught courses through cohort and often block scheduling (scheduling of courses in

back-to-back time slots). The paired-course model links two courses and is considered the simplest of learning communities models in terms of curricular strategy. A paired-course learning community typically enrolls a group of twenty to thirty students in two courses. Offerings tend to be existing courses that traditionally enroll significant numbers of first-year students. One of the two courses in the pairing is usually a basic composition or communications course. These courses tend to be more interdisciplinary in nature and promote a classroom environment in which students and faculty get to know each other.

In paired-course learning communities, classes are often linked based on logical curricular connections and skill areas. A pairing of calculus with general chemistry promotes scientific discovery and quantitative reasoning skills. Other courses commonly used in pairs are college math, introductory courses across the social sciences, literature, philosophy, and first-term courses in science.

At Temple University, students can enroll in a linked course learning community that satisfies either general education requirements or an introductory requirement in the major. Students interested in communications might enroll in a community linking Introduction to Mass Media and College Composition. Faculty teaching in this community create a theme, such as Understanding Mass Media Through Literacy, around which they build class discussion, lectures, writing assignments, and activities. As the semester progresses, students begin to see connections between the courses: "We discuss the role of media in Introduction to Mass Media [Journalism]. Then we look at the media's hidden, encoded agenda in English [class]."

A pair might also include a first-year seminar course, a for-credit offering designed to assist students in the transition to college. A learning community commonly offered at Temple University pairs the first-year seminar course, Learning for the New Century, with the precollege composition course, Introduction to Academic Discourse. Skill development is an important goal in this community.

The cluster approach typically expands the paired-course model by linking three or four individually taught courses around a theme. Clusters are often small and usually enroll cohorts of twenty to thirty students. One course tends to be a writing course, and the cluster usually includes a weekly seminar. The weekly seminar plays an important role in helping students and faculty build curricular connections between the courses. These seminars offer ideal settings for synthesis and community-building activities.

All daytime students in the Liberal Arts and Sciences program at LaGuardia Community College are required to take an introductory cluster in their first semester. Students placed into remedial courses enroll in clusters in their second semester. Clusters include the LIB 110 (Liberal Arts) hour, a course that meets one hour a week and is usually team-taught by two or three faculty teaching in the cluster. This hour is typically reserved for activities that promote reflection and curricular integration of the disciplines represented in the community. To meet the LIB 110 requirement for the Drama, Culture and Communication cluster, students write a research paper on a theatrical production using

sources from the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts Library. They also participate in field trips to see and critique plays.

Cohorts in Large Courses

These learning communities are often referred to as FIGs—freshman interest groups. A less commonly used approach is the federated learning community: student cohorts enrolled in larger courses guided by a teacher who serves as a master learner. The federated learning community integrates courses around a theme. The master learner “enrolls” in the courses with the students and facilitates a weekly seminar to help students synthesize what they are learning. The master learner usually has no teaching responsibilities beyond the federated learning community (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990).

FIGs are the simplest model in terms of organization and cost (Gabelnick et al., 1990). This approach works well at large universities or at other institutions where first-year students are typically enrolled in at least one or two large lecture courses a semester. In this model, learning communities students represent a subset of the total enrollment. When a large lecture course also involves smaller recitation or discussion sessions, FIG students are typically enrolled in a designated learning community section. In addition to one or two large courses, FIGs typically include a smaller writing course and a weekly seminar. Enrollments in these sections are usually limited to FIG students. An undergraduate often facilitates the weekly seminar.

At the University of Washington, FIGs typically consist of two larger-sized lecture courses, a smaller English, humanities, or arts course, and a one-credit course, University Resources, Information, and Technology. Each FIG has a theme, typically coordinated around a general area of study such as business, liberal arts, sciences, or engineering. The Performing Arts: Drama FIG includes Greek and Roman Classics, Acting, and Survey of Music paired with the one-credit seminar.

Team-Taught Programs

Team-taught learning communities, also called coordinated studies programs, enroll varying numbers of students in two or more courses organized around an interdisciplinary theme. Team-taught programs are the most extensive in terms of curricular integration and faculty role. Some require full-time faculty and student involvement. Participation can also be part-time, involving two to five courses. In most but not all instances, the learning community constitutes students' entire schedule for at least a term and sometimes an entire academic year.

Themes are faculty generated and interdisciplinary. They can be broad and liberal arts based, or emphasize skill development in related disciplines such as math and science. Small group discussion sections, sometimes called book seminars, are an important part of the community. Students and a faculty member break off into smaller groups to discuss an assigned text and build on what students are learning in the other courses.

Total community enrollment varies, but can range from forty to seventy-five students. In larger team-taught programs, the cohort is often subdivided into smaller seminar groups to achieve a faculty-to-student ratio of one faculty member to twenty or twenty-five students (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Due to increasing fiscal pressures, typical enrollment in these programs is now more likely to be closer to seventy-five students and three teachers, with a teacher-to-student ratio of twenty-five to one.

Ecology of Hope is a year-long coordinated study program designed for first-year students at Evergreen State College. The curriculum focuses on global warming, rain forest devastation, industrial pollution, and other environmental concerns. Students and teachers explore many questions, including, "What can we do?" and "How can we have sustainable, meaningful lives that enable us to create appropriate and effective action for positive change over the long haul?" Upon completion of the program, students are awarded credit in several areas: writing, quantitative reasoning, environmental studies, art, cultural studies, scientific methods, history, and political economy.

Residence-Based Programs

A fourth approach to learning communities, residence-based programs, involves the adaptation of a particular curricular model to include a residential component. A primary goal of residence-based education is the integration of students' living and academic environments. Educational programming in residence halls centers around the belief that not all learning occurs in the classroom. A significant amount of what students learn during college comes from their experiences of daily living, and there is natural overlap between students' academic and social learning activities.

According to Schroeder (1994), "Learning communities are fostered by commonality and consistency of purpose, shared values, and transcendent themes" (p. 171). In residence-based learning communities, the role of residence life is to create conditions that promote these values. Residence-based learning communities involve more than assigning students with similar majors to the same floor of a residence hall. Rather, intentionally organized student cohorts enroll in specified curricular offerings and reside in dedicated living space.

Residence-based learning communities integrate diverse curricular and cocurricular experiences. For this reason, residence-based learning communities may be the most radical of the four learning communities approaches described in this chapter because they challenge and require change within multiple campus systems: curriculum, teaching, and housing (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The curricular component of residence-based programs typically resembles one of the three learning communities approaches described previously in this chapter: clusters, FIGs, or team-taught programs. Academic and cocurricular community activities are scheduled in residence halls, and in many instances classes actually meet in classrooms located in residential spaces.

FIGs at the University of Missouri-Columbia evolved out of the collaborative efforts of academic and student affairs. Missouri's FIGs are residential learning communities, located in more than three-quarters of the university's residence halls, that involve courses from across the first-year curricula. Small cohorts of fifteen to twenty first-year students enroll in three sections of the same general education courses, share living space, and complete a one-credit seminar designed to integrate material from the general education courses and introduce students to support resources. The Family Studies FIG is designed for students interested in working with children and families through the agencies and organizations that serve them. Students enroll in three courses—Introduction to the Study of Families, General Psychology, and General Biology for Non-Majors—and are housed in a particular residence hall.

The Michigan Community Scholars Program at the University of Michigan creates a collaborative, supportive community of students, faculty, and staff who share an interest in and are committed to understanding their roles in various communities and in exploring service-learning opportunities. This residential community features introductory math and English courses, first-year seminars, and community service courses. There are leadership opportunities, programming, and academic support resources for students in the community.

Learning Communities for Specific Populations

Learning communities also represent an effective curricular strategy for supporting students in historically difficult courses, student populations with unique college transition and academic needs, or students with specific career objectives. There are also successful learning communities programs at institutions where all or most students live off-campus.

Learning communities bring students together in the classroom, where they can establish academic and social networks that are of tremendous benefit to the commuter student. Another benefit of learning communities for off-campus students is that they provide a setting for community-based delivery of support services such as tutoring, mentoring, or career counseling. Information technology can be used to help students and teachers in learning communities remain connected to each other outside the classroom. For off-campus students, learning communities provide a home base on campus and a sense of interpersonal and intellectual connectedness that is often lacking in the commuter experience (Levine & Shapiro, 2000).

The New Student House Program at LaGuardia Community College is a learning community for students with basic skills needs. Curriculum and instruction in reading, writing, and speech are coordinated and often organized around a theme, activities and assignments in the three courses are linked, and classes are sometimes team-taught. LaGuardia also offers a new student house community for students for whom English is a second language. New Student-ESL House features six credit hours of English as a Second language, four hours of basic reading with an additional reading lab, and a three-credit college-level

speech communications course. The cluster also includes a first-year seminar that focuses on study skills and orientation to college.

The ASCENT program at the University of Northern Colorado annually enrolls approximately seventy-five students in a premedicine and prehealth learning community linking composition, biology, and chemistry courses. The community also features a team-taught seminar that covers prehealth issues and reviews information on professional school requirements. Supplemental Instruction for the biology and chemistry classes is offered as well.

IMPLEMENTING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Implementing learning communities involves (1) recognizing opportunities for change, (2) creating structures to accommodate learning communities, (3) identifying resources, (4) making the program visible, and (5) assessing program effectiveness. The leadership for learning communities may come from faculty, academic administration, student affairs, or a combination of each. It is important that the implementation effort is broad and inclusive, recognizing the many individuals and resources that support student success. Early planning for learning communities should bring key players together in frequent conversations. A campuswide committee where participants can share ideas, explore assumptions, and build relationships should be formed. This type of collaborative planning is consistent with the goals and values of learning communities that campuses seek to create for their students (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Those designing learning communities on their campuses need to be sensitive to their particular student, faculty, and institutional cultures. The most successful programs are those fully integrated within the institution. How learning communities are organized, their location within the academic program, and how they will evolve and grow depend in large part on the broad goals for the program and where the initial inquiry and idea began. Common reasons a campus considers learning communities include a need to increase student involvement and engagement, a desire to create community among commuting students, or a mandate to improve retention.

Recognizing Opportunities for Change

Often the first step toward creating learning communities is motivated by the recognition that something needs to be fixed or improved. Perhaps the institution suffers from the perception that it is unfriendly or impersonal to undergraduates. Some campuses are driven by a desire to attract more and better-quality first-year students, and others implement learning communities to better educate and retain all students. Linking learning communities to a broader campus goal of improving undergraduate recruitment and retention can be another powerful motive for change. Look to the institutional mission statement, strategic plans or annual reports, department or program reviews, existing examples of collaboration between departments, programs and units, and external reviews

or reports on trends in higher education for language and opportunities to introduce the concept of learning communities to the campus community (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

It is also important to address sources of resistance such as faculty autonomy, disciplinary boundaries, lack of resources, and inappropriate reward systems. Avoid associating the idea and effort with one individual or office. Be aware of the various levels of approval and governance to which any new program is subjected. Involve decision makers with a voice in approval processes early in the planning.

Creating Structures to Support Learning Communities

Creating learning communities requires working within the existing structure and working outside existing structures (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Whether the impetus for learning communities comes from faculty or administration, from academic affairs or student affairs, the same organizational principles apply. On most campuses, change happens through the work of committees with ongoing consultation, and the first question that must be addressed is, Who should be involved?

Learning communities faculty can be broadly defined to include those not typically involved in the teaching enterprise. Others who can be members of learning communities teaching teams in addition to faculty members are learning support specialists, academic advisers, residence life staff, librarians, and computer technology specialists (MacGregor et al., 2001). Students—both undergraduate and graduate—can serve as teachers, peer advisers, tutors, mentors, and resident assistants in learning communities.

Collaborative relationships develop through personal contacts, so it makes sense that early planning for learning communities should bring key players together in frequent, informal discussions. Identify priorities and then establish goals and intended outcomes for the learning communities program. It is very important to develop a planning calendar consistent with regularly scheduled events, procedures, and deadlines for the campus planning process.

Identifying Resources

Be realistic about cost and resource needs. When starting learning communities, consider the costs to departments and colleges in faculty time. Work with units to reach compromises on sharing resources and costs. Promote departmental collaboration by offering incentives from release time to money for faculty development. Because cross-disciplinary learning communities are more interesting and more viable in the long run, it is worth the extra effort and time it takes to work out the details between departments. According to Elliot and Decker (1999), campuswide support for learning communities comes from four sources:

- People (faculty administrators, academic support staff, and student affairs professionals)
- Organizational culture (the administrative home for the program and connections that placement entails)

- Context (the role and purpose of the learning community on a campus)
- Financial support (redirected funding and new money)

As a campus begins projecting the cost of learning communities, it is useful to have an inventory of additional resources needed. There are typically three categories of costs for learning communities: (1) one-time start-up costs for which a campus might seek outside grant or gift support; (2) logistical and operating expense support that allows the learning community to become part of the sustainable infrastructure of the institution; and (3) faculty development and reward structure costs that should be considered long-term investments in teaching and learning (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Any requests for resources should be consistent with program goals, expected outcomes, size and scope of the program, and model of learning communities.

Many campuses start small, gradually scaling up in terms of the numbers of communities offered, students enrolled, and faculty involved. Decisions to expand must be explored in the context of program goals, available resources, sources of support, and evidence of the impact that learning communities are having on the institution. One effective way to increase the size of a learning communities program, particularly at a larger institution, is to network with other programs. Temple University expanded its learning communities initiative by partnering with its undergraduate school of business to provide learning clusters for all entering business students. After learning of the value of learning communities for students in other programs, a committee of business faculty and administration decided to revise its undergraduate curriculum to require a community experience for all of its full-time students. Students enroll in a cluster that includes business, law, first-year writing, computer applications, and a two-credit introduction to business seminar. The School of Business and the Learning Communities program share responsibility for scheduling the course in the community. The Learning Communities program coordinates faculty development, and academic advisers from the business school register students and teach the seminar. This collaborative effort enrolls an additional 350 to 400 students in communities each fall.

Making the Program Visible

Provide learning communities updates at department, faculty senate, and curriculum committee meetings. It is also important that the program have representation on various campus committees, including those charged with reviewing academic advising or admissions policies. Keeping the campus community informed of the learning communities work creates shared ownership. Consider giving interviews to the student and faculty newspapers. Invite others on campus not already involved with the program to visit classes and talk to learning communities faculty and students.

Use print and on-line resources to market the program to prospective and current students. Develop a program brochure as well as promotional literature

describing the individual communities. Ask faculty teaching in the communities to provide descriptions that can be given to students during orientation or registration. Create a learning communities Web site that contains basic program information, a list of offerings, and answers to frequently asked questions.

ASSESSING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Decisions about assessment and evaluation should be part of the ongoing planning and implementation process, and assessment plans should be made alongside decisions about the intended outcomes of learning communities. Using the comprehensive model of assessing first-year programs suggested by Upcraft in Chapter Twenty-Seven, learning communities administrators and faculty should know a lot about the backgrounds and characteristics of first-year student participants, assess their needs, measure their satisfaction with the learning community experience, and, perhaps most important, assess whether participation in a learning community is associated with desired outcomes such as grades, retention, and other program-specific outcomes.

For example, if an intended outcome of participation in learning communities is greater student involvement with faculty, this should be a focus of the research. Assessment plans can and will be amended with program development and as the institution learns more about what students and faculty experience as members of learning communities. There will be many questions that need to be answered. Start small, and consider addressing research questions that yield important and usable information and can be easily answered within a reasonable time frame using available methods or researchers (Ketcheson & Levine, 1999).

An assessment plan should be developed in the context of other evaluation activities taking place. Consider uses of data already collected. Many institutions collect new student data as part of the admissions, placement testing, or orientation process. This information can be useful in describing participants, as well as nonparticipants, in learning communities. If an institution already collects information on the reading and writing skills of entering students, consider ways of linking those data to a learning communities study on the performance of learning communities participants and nonparticipants in first-year writing courses. In selecting research methods, consider an integrated research approach that relies on both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Using multiple methods available to educational researchers allows you to address a variety of research questions in rich contexts and from different perspectives (Shulman, 1988).

There is still a great deal to learn about what first-year students and faculty experience in learning communities. Quantitative research shows that learning communities students typically get higher grades and stay in school longer than their non-learning communities peers. Qualitative research shows that learning communities students are more likely to feel connected to the institution than

non-learning community students. Several national surveys, including the National Survey of Student Engagement and College Student Experiences Questionnaire, are available to help campuses measure if learning communities students are more engaged and involved in the campus community than their peers. Even with a growth in available research on learning communities, questions remain. Are students learning in deeper, more meaningful ways? Do faculty change their teaching practices, and does this change extend to other areas of the curriculum?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Learning communities are a curricular model for enhancing student learning and deepening their engagement with the institution. They support first-year students in their academic and social transition to college. When learning communities for students are created, cross-campus partnerships take root, and communities of faculty, administrators, and staff are created and nurtured. Consider the following when developing and maintaining learning communities:

- *Monitor learning communities from their onset, and make changes as they grow and develop.* It is possible that the structures put in place at the start (collaborative committees, faculty liaisons between colleges, and policy committees) may not be the structures that emerge once learning communities begin to operate. An institution that starts out designing a coordinated studies program may instead install linked courses in the curriculum, while a campus beginning with links in a first-year experience program may grow to clusters. Institutions need to be open to the same change in practice we hope students and faculty in our communities will experience.
- *Be collaborative, take risks, and experiment.* Meet often with all involved to review the opportunities, challenges, and resources that affect learning communities work.
- *Obtain commitments from senior leadership and others in positions to offer support and provide resources for learning communities programs.* Maintaining the support of senior leadership is critical to the success of learning communities.
- *Form partnerships with other programs engaged in similar work.* Explore ways to share resources and expertise. If your campus has an established center for teaching and learning, seek advice there on faculty development. Meet regularly with institutional researchers to plan and conduct assessment.
- *Create structures to encourage and support faculty involvement.* Regularly scheduled workshops, retreats, and brown-bag lunch sessions are some approaches for bringing faculty together to form teaching teams and plan their learning community designs. Workshop topics might focus on pedagogy, assessment, or student development. Faculty development is also an important opportunity to recognize dedicated teachers for the hard work of teaching in learning communities.

- *Carefully consider policies that impede change or present barriers for faculty teaching in learning communities.* Do faculty tenure and promotion policies and practices recognize and reward the interdisciplinary and collaborative teaching that takes place in learning communities? How can we develop a cost-effective system for providing faculty with sufficient preterm planning time?

- *Regularly gather and disseminate credible evidence that the program works and is meeting its goals.* Such information can influence policy change.

- *Learn from the experiences of others.* The considerable growth in the development of learning communities has led to more writing on the subject from a variety of perspectives: impact on students and faculty, connections with first-year experience programs, partnerships between academic and student affairs, and good practice for teaching, learning, and assessment. Attend sessions on learning communities at national and regional conferences. Subscribe to listservs that offer frequent discussions on learning communities or related topics.

CONCLUSION

While learning communities are not something new, they continue to be something different. Participation in a learning community requires campuses, sometimes in very radical ways, to rethink and restructure how they organize and deliver their curriculum. First-year students are challenged to learn with and from each other, and faculty are challenged to approach subjects in new and more interdisciplinary ways. When implemented effectively, learning communities provide a powerful source of challenge and support in helping first-year students make a successful transition to college and fulfill their educational goals.