Building Community

Stories and Strategies for Future Learning Community Faculty and Professionals

Edited by
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Editors' Introduction

Terra Peckskamp and Carrie McLaughlin

THE late 1990s were a time when faculty and staff at Syracuse University (SU) were examining ways to make a positive impact on student learning and satisfaction, and to create an SU "Signature Experience." In 1998 the Whitman School of Management, the Honors Program, and the Office of Residence Life conducted a small pilot project that placed 43 students in two learning communities (Management and Honors). "Supported by experience and research," wrote then–Vice President for Undergraduate Studies Ronald R. Cavanagh in a memo describing the effort, "it is our assumption that students learn lessons faster and retain them longer when these lessons are reinforced by linked or networked learning environments cutting across the curricula and the co-curricula." Nine years later, in the 2007–2008 academic year, there were over 1,600 students participating in 42 learning communities and lifestyle housing options. In addition, over 200 faculty members, staff, paraprofessional students, and administrators participate in the coordination of learning community programs.

Learning communities are often used as one strategy in an institution's effort to improve undergraduate student success (Shapiro and Levine, 1999, p. 15). Learning communities can positively influence student intellectual and social development, leading to greater student satisfaction with their undergraduate experience, and, on a grander scale, they can even serve as a factor in the reinvention of undergraduate education (Shapiro and Levine, 1999, p. 171). As demonstrated through assessment projects, learning communities at SU help ease first-year student transitions by making a large campus more navigable, creating a more academically and socially supportive residential environment, and creating connections among and between students, faculty, and staff.

Successful learning communities require the participation and support of many different campus stakeholders, including academic departments; the registrar; housing, residence life, and admissions offices; and others. Indeed,

Cavanagh and his colleagues cited the benefits of such collaboration for the larger institutional culture when formally proposing the creation of a permanent learning communities program at SU: "Collaboration and shared responsibility among faculty and professional staff in Academic and Student Affairs promotes a sharing of best practices, curricular coherence, and the integration of student developmental planning. Providing these opportunities for integration benefits everyone."[1] But creating a learning community program that has a positive impact on students, engages faculty, and is well coordinated is no easy task, and there are many stories of challenges and success along the way. The purpose of this book is to share some of these stories.

The book is divided into two sections. The first part, "History, Structure, and Assessment," provides an overview of learning communities. In the first chapter, "Understanding the Evolution of Learning Community Concepts: A Historical Perspective," Dianna Winslow presents a historical survey of learning communities, going back to John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn in the 1920s and the debates about general education. Various learning community structures and models are discussed by Heather Strine Patterson in "Learning Communities: A Structural Overview." jarod halter and Camila Lértora Nardozzi address learning community assessment in their chapter, "Tips and Strategies for Assessing Learning Communities." Finally, W. Leslie Burleson and Michele Tarnow present stories gathered from a qualitative learning community assessment project at Syracuse University in "Learning Communities Assessment: Challenges and Recommendations from Faculty and Staff Perspectives."

Part Two, "Teaching and Learning in a Learning Community," builds on the structural groundwork of the first section by presenting individual stories about learning community experiences, as students and faculty members share their insights on learning communities' impact on various aspects of teaching and learning. Eileen Strempel examines the effort to build community in a classroom in "The Arts Adventure LC: A Classroom-to-Community Cultural Connection." Eric Alderman explores the challenges of creating a learning community from scratch in "Creating a Unique Learning Community Through Creativity, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship." Extending the theme of teaching and learning, Silvio Torres-Saillant and James Duah-Agyeman delve into what it means to create a learning environment where difficult conversations can be had in "Diversity and Citizenship."

Paul Buckley, a graduate student when he wrote "Creating Change and Continuity in Your Learning Community," discusses the challenges of coordinating a learning community while pursuing an advanced degree, and Jamie Kathleen Portillo considers the rewards and difficulties of teaching in a

[1] Quoted from a 1999 document prepared for the Office of the Vice Chancellor.

learning community as a graduate student in "Learning Community Encounters and Strategies for Effective Teaching Assistantship." Braden and Rachel Smith, who were both undergraduate participants in a learning community and later taught in learning communities as graduate students, bring their unique perspective to bear in "Bridging the Gap: Constructing Faculty–Student Relationships for Mutual Learning." Maria Lopez also took part in a learning community, but as a graduate student, and reflects on her experience in "The Higher Education Learning Community of Syracuse University: A Participant's Perspective." Chris Calvert-Minor contemplates what graduate education might look like if there were more graduate student–focused learning communities in "Through the Looking Glass of Undergraduate Learning Communities (And What the Graduate Student Finds)."

A number of strategies for implementing a successful learning community are offered by Elizabeth Occhino and Jennifer Kellington in "The Mary Ann Shaw Center for Public and Community Service: Lessons Learned." One of these strategies is student mentoring, the subject of "Mentoring and the Gateway Learning Community: The Importance of Mentoring in Providing Access to Social Capital" by Larry Thomas and Nicole Zervas Adsitt. Jennah Jones and Joshua Lawrie conclude the expository chapters by comparing and contrasting two learning community experiences in "Institutional Pedagogies: Exploring Two Learning Community Programs." The final contribution, "Critical Learning Community Resources for Educating Campus Stakeholders," by Terra Peckskamp and Joshua McIntosh, summarizes additional learning community resources.

This book offers a snapshot of the learning community stories and experiences of Syracuse University students, faculty, and staff. These stories offer insight, humor, and useful strategies, and together they provide a wonderful look into the learning community world. We hope that you will be able to connect with these stories and that they can be used to inform your own teaching and learning.

References

Shapiro, N. S., & Levine, J. H. (1999). *Creating learning communities: A practical guide for winning support, organizing for change, and implementing programs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Introduction

Sandra Hurd

ONE measure of a university program that has "arrived" is its mention in publications that provide prospective students and their families with national rankings. By that measure, learning communities—although they have been around in various forms for decades—have finally arrived. The first national rankings of learning community programs appeared in *U.S. News and World Report* in 2001, and Syracuse University can be justifiably proud that its learning community program has been ranked ever since.

Why are learning communities so important in higher education today? And why is it important to offer students—particularly first-time, first-year students—the opportunity to participate in learning communities? A college or university, especially a large one, is a complex and often intimidating environment, both socially and academically, for an incoming student. In those critical first few days, when many of the attitudes and values students carry with them throughout their undergraduate careers take root, learning communities give students a way to become immediately connected and engaged. And contemplating life with thirty or more strangers produces much less anxiety when students know they share common ground upon which to build relationships. In addition to promoting social integration, learning communities promote academic success by providing a network of peers with whom to study and share academic experiences, by creating connections with faculty and staff, and by blurring the lines between learning in and out of the classroom.

But it is not only students who benefit from learning communities. Faculty and staff who work with learning communities report that they both enjoy the experience and learn a great deal from collaboration that crosses the sometimes seemingly impermeable boundaries between academic affairs and student affairs, as well as boundaries between the disciplines. They also enjoy the kind of boundary crossing that happens as they connect multiple kinds of learning experiences to develop a more holistic learning environment for students.

Syracuse University clearly benefits as well from greater student satisfaction and an improved academic climate. In 2004, SU participated in the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP). The results of that survey show that SU students who participate in learning communities are more likely than non-participants to find the residence hall climate academically and socially supportive; to spend time discussing sociocultural issues with peers; to desire involvement in research; to be part of student clubs/groups; to enjoy challenging academic pursuits; and to have a sense of civic engagement. These are all outcomes that lead to deeper learning and greater student success.

It is my hope that what you learn from this book intrigues you and sparks your interest in finding out more about learning communities. Whether you are in the academy for only a short time or want to make teaching your life's work, participating in a learning community can be a wonderful and very rewarding experience.

Critical Learning Community Resources for Educating Campus Stakeholders

Terra Peckskamp and Joshua G. McIntosh

INTEREST continues to grow among college campuses in using learning communities as an institutional practice to strengthen student engagement, learning, and retention. Once administrators make a commitment to exploring the possibility of developing a learning community program, they are often challenged with fully explaining learning community philosophy, foundations, structures, outcomes, and assessments to various constituents to garner their support. This chapter highlights some key pieces of literature that can be useful in developing learning community programs.

Philosophy

Understanding the philosophical underpinnings of learning communities can assist in initiating conversations with faculty and senior administrators about learning communities. The first article annotated below (Barr & Tagg, 1995) does not deal exclusively with learning communities, but it provides a foundation for ways to think about the role of learning in higher education. The other articles are beneficial in that they provide a rationale for learning communities as a tool for improving teaching and learning.

Barr, R. B., & J. Tagg. (1995). From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, *27*(6), 12–25.

This article discusses a paradigm shift in higher education that supports learning communities as an institutional practice. Institutions of higher education have historically existed to provide instruction (Instruction Paradigm), but are now shifting to become learning-centered (Learning

Paradigm). Learning communities are one of many practices that support the learning-centered approach to education because they are intended to *engage* students in course content, there is a shared responsibility for learning between peers and instructors, and they are often interdisciplinary by design.

Cross, K. P. (1998). Why learning communities? Why now? *About Campus*, *3* (3), 4–11.

Recognizing that some administrators view learning communities as simply a fad, Cross provides an overview of the philosophy and research that helps frame the reasons so many administrators and faculty members are interested in implementing them. Specifically, Cross argues that there are three categories of reasons for the growing interest in learning communities: philosophical (learning communities align with the changing philosophy of knowledge), research (learning communities align with what research indicates about learning), and pragmatic (learning communities work).

Tinto, V. (2000). Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success in higher education. *Journal of Institutional Research 9*(1), 48–53. Retrieved June 23, 2010, from http://www.aair.org.au/jir/May00/Tinto.pdf

In this article, Tinto argues that although the content of learning communities can vary widely, all learning communities have three things in common: shared knowledge, shared knowing, and shared responsibility. This article also shares information on the concept of co-enrollment to help readers understand what an ideal learning community should reflect. Understanding the philosophical underpinnings of learning communities can assist in initiating conversations with faculty and senior administrators about learning communities.

Foundations and Structures

The following resources all provide practical information on the logistics of implementing learning communities while also providing historical, philosophical, and assessment-related information. Learning community staff members have used information from these works to develop support for learning community programs, to influence campus climates, to deepen partnerships, to provide an overview to campus stakeholders who should be involved in learning community administration, and as part of faculty–staff development workshops that help create common goals and a common language.

Gabelnick, F., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R. S., & Smith, B. L. (1990). *Learning communities: Creating connections among students, faculty, and disciplines.* New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 41. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This publication is one of the foundational pieces of learning community literature. Ideas and information on how to design, implement, and evaluate learning communities are placed within a context of educational theory and reform.

Laufgraben, J. L., & Shapiro, N. S. (2004). *Sustaining and improving learning communities.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This book, considered a follow-up to *Creating learning communities: A practical guide to winning support, organizing for change, and implementing programs* (Shapiro & Levine, 1999), checks in with learning communities on a national level and examines the progress made by those that have moved from learning community implementation to learning community sustainability. Areas examined include goals, assessment, and the experiences of students and faculty, as well as some of the innovations in learning community structures and uses (e.g., diversity education).

Lenning, O. T., & Ebbers, L. H. (1999). *The powerful potential of learning communities: Improving education for the future* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Vol. 26, No. 6). Washington, DC: The Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University.

This valuable publication provides a strong overview of some of the different types of learning communities and also discusses the future of learning communities, including virtual learning communities.

Shapiro, N. S., & Levine, J. H. (1999). *Creating learning communities: A practical guide to winning support, organizing for change, and implementing programs*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

This book can be considered a "how-to" guide for implementing learning communities. The authors begin with the theoretical background and rationale for learning communities and proceed to curriculum development, reward systems, and administrative structures. The book ends with information on evaluating and assessing learning communities.

Smith, B. L., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R. S., & Gabelnick, F. (2004). *Learning communities: Reforming undergraduate education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

As one of the more recent publications on learning communities, this book provides up-to-date information on learning community structures, implementation, evaluation, and assessment. The authors pay particular attention to learning communities as instruments for reforming undergraduate education and improving educational efforts for underprepared students.

Zeller, W. J., James, P., and Klippenstein, S. (2002). The residential nexus: A focus on student learning. *Talking Stick, 19*(6), 7–16.

Updating a 1994 document prepared by the Association of College and University Housing Officers–International (ACUHO–I), this overview of trends, research, and current issues indicates how housing and residence life professionals can contribute to students' learning.

Outcomes and Assessment

These articles provide assessment data that can help administrators and faculty understand the positive outcomes of learning community participation. External information on assessment and outcomes is particularly important when developing support for learning communities. As any learning community program develops, assessment and outcomes data specific to that particular program becomes important for sustaining and strengthening the program.

Inkelas, K. K., & Weisman, J. L. (2003). Different by design: An examination of student outcomes among participants in three types of living-learning programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, *44,* 335–368.

Residence-based (living-learning) programs have been understudied relative to other types of learning communities. This study examines student experiences and outcomes across three broad types of living-learning communities and compares them with a control sample at one university. Participants in living-learning programs show stronger positive outcomes on all dependent measures than the control group, and the strongest outcomes on dependent measures that most closely parallel the emphases of each particular program type. These findings can help colleges and universities decide which type of program best suits their needs, as well as which elements from the different types of living-learning communities could profitably be incorporated into the college experience of all students.

Love, A. G. (1999). What are learning communities? In J. H. Levine (Ed.), *Learning communities: New structures, new partnerships for learning* (pp. 1–8). Columbia: National Resource Center for the First-

Year Experience and Students and Transition, University of South Carolina.

Defining learning communities can be difficult given the complexity of the varied learning community structures employed at institutions of higher education. This article provides an overview of the nine pivotal characteristics of learning communities, highlighting the positive outcomes of their implementation. In addition, the article provides a brief but helpful overview of the learning community movement and its philosophical groundings (e.g., Dewey).

Pike, G. R. (1999). The effects of residential learning communities and traditional residential living arrangements on educational gains during the first year of college. *Journal of College Student Development*, *40*(3), 269–284.

This study compares the experiences of first-year students in residential learning communities and in traditional residence hall settings at the same institution. Using the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), Pike finds that students in residential learning environments have significantly higher levels of involvement and interaction, supporting their intellectual development and integration into college life.

Zhao, C.-M., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education, 45*(2), 115–138.

This article is a summary of a study that examines connections between student engagement (as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement) and learning community participation. The authors found that learning community participation is positively linked to student engagement. This article could be helpful to those who are interested in garnering a better understanding of student engagement or those interested in assessing the effectiveness of their institution's learning communities from an engagement perspective.

Useful Web Resources

In addition to the print resources listed above, there are also several Web-based resources on learning communities:

The National Study of Living-Learning Programs Web site provides information and results of the first national study of living-learning programs.

http://www.livelearnstudy.net

The Residential Learning Communities International Registry provides a searchable database with structural, programmatic, and contact information for registered learning communities, as well as links to over 200 learning community programs.

http://pcc.bgsu.edu/rlcch/submissions

The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College offers a wealth of information on learning community implementation, structures, pedagogy, resources, and assessment, including a searchable National Learning Communities Directory.

http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter

Living-Learning Communities: An Annotated Bibliography, by C. Ryan Akers and Merrily S. Dunn, is a comprehensive overview of many living-learning resources.

http://www.livelearnstudy.net/images/LLP_Annotated_Bibliography.doc

Contributors

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