

# Learning Communities: Foundations for Student Learning and Engagement

By Frank E. Ross and Scott E. Evenbeck

Learning communities provide the context for student success by placing students in cohort groups often centered on their majors or on themes in which they have interest. In the recent report on the first ten years of the National Survey of Student Engagement (2007), Kuh and his colleagues stressed both the importance of students having a high impact educational experience in the first year (e.g., learning community) and participation in an educationally engaging activity with a faculty member in their major (e.g., undergraduate research, internship, service-learning, or study abroad).

As part of the Liberal Education: America's Promise (LEAP) program, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007) has developed a set of Principles of Undergraduate Excellence which stress the importance of providing students with a compass or pathway for charting their course through the undergraduate years. Hence, the learning community can be the context for setting the stage for entering students, giving them—in their first year—a preview of the options for engaged learning later in their collegiate experience as well as both the philosophical and practical reasons for planning such engagement.

Learning communities represent a movement in higher education pedagogical reform that receives considerable attention. Collaboration among various communities of practice, both within and across institutions, provides tremendous support for sustaining this work and brings it to the forefront of discussion in higher education.

The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, housed at The Evergreen State College, is the center of activity in the development, enhancement and assessment of learning communities. The *Journal of Learning Communities Research*, housed at Kennesaw State University, contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning by providing an interdisciplinary forum to engage learning community researchers and practitioners. Also, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, at the University of South Carolina, provides considerable support to the national dialogue on learning communities through publications and other professional development opportunities.

A national learning communities conference is convened annually by Delta Community College, Harper Community College, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), Kennesaw State University, and the Metropolitan

Community College of Kansas City, and has become the largest national conference devoted solely to the discussion of learning communities in higher education.

In November 2007, higher education professionals came together on the campus of IUPUI for the 12th Annual National Learning Communities Conference. The conference theme, “Students at the Center,” provided a foundation for discussion of the critical role that students play in learning communities on campuses across the country.

Conference sessions addressed a wide variety of topics related to the impact of learning communities on student learning including: student-centered pedagogies, diverse students in learning communities, the co-curriculum, integration in the first-year experience, undergraduate research in learning communities, assessment of learning community outcomes, the role of student mentors, and residential learning communities.

It is critical for practitioners working with learning communities to assess and document their effectiveness in enhancing student learning and success. The 12th Annual National Learning Communities Conference provided many examples of this. The articles in this special issue of *Metropolitan Universities* journal are representative of that good work.

Lauren P. Chism, Sarah S. Baker, Michele J. Hansen, and Gayle Williams discuss the benefit that first-year students at IUPUI receive as a result of participating in intentionally-linked academic support initiatives, including a bridge program, learning communities and themed learning communities. Their data suggests that students experience positive gains in academic success as a result of enrolling in these mutually supporting programs.

Ellen R. Belton and Tracey F. Lander describe a semester-long faculty development program designed to support learning community faculty at Brooklyn College. These faculty members are successful in enhancing the learning and academic success of their students as a result of participation in this integrative development program.

John Ambrose, Karen Hauschild, and Kathleen Ruppe detail the powerful partnership between academic affairs and student affairs at North Carolina State University. This collaborative work resulted in the First Year College Village, a successful first-year living and learning community that creates “a seamless learning environment that positively impacts student persistence towards graduation.”

Ann Gabbert, Corrine Peschka, and Jackie Spradley discuss the impact of developmental reading learning communities on students at The University of Texas El Paso, an urban commuter university with a non-traditional student body.

Juan Carlos Huerta, Gale Stuart, Lauren Chism, and Michele Hansen remind us that we all continue to evolve learning community programs as a function of assessment and research. They stress the need for multiple methods to describe accurately the impact learning communities have on student learning and success.

Articles in this special issue were chosen to represent the diversity of contemporary best practices that inform the current state and set the foundation for the future of learning communities work. Faculty, staff, administrators, and students working in and with learning community programs will benefit from the strategies outlined here, all designed with intentionality to support student learning and success.

## **References**

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