

LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES AS A  
STRATEGY FOR  
QUALITY LEARNING  
AND EDUCATIONAL  
EQUITY

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## IN THIS ISSUE

We are excited about this issue of the Washington Center news because it reflects the ongoing evolution of learning community work, and its capacity to serve as an effective means for reaching the goal of educational equity. As the writers of the lead article, *Emerging Trends in Learning Community Development* indicate, learning communities are increasingly being designed as

### Co-Directors' Message

intervention strategies—with the clear intent to improve the academic success rates in particular courses, and for supporting the learning of particular groups of students.

The article by Phyllis Worthy Dawkins describes the growth of learning communities in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, a promising national trend. Matthew Pistilli describes a learning community program at Purdue University with higher than average enrollment and retention by students of color. Charles Pastors and David Leaman describe the learning community program at Northeastern Illinois University, which is supporting the academic success of Hispanic students. Sara Baldwin's article describes how South Seattle Community College is using faculty learning communities to help faculty across the curriculum develop the knowledge and the skills to support the learning of non-native English speakers. These four articles testify to the power of using learning communities to support particular groups of learners.

The next two articles assess the effectiveness of learning communities in relation to student learning. Jim Harnish's article analyzes the overall effectiveness of the learning community program at North Seattle Community College, and Gilda Sheppard and Carl Waluconis write about the development of students' media literacy skills in the context of their coordinated studies program. Both of these articles suggest the next wave of assessment and writing about learning communities, with a focus on the actual learning that these innovative curricular designs make possible.

We are pleased to announce a new assessment initiative which will begin with our March Learning Community Coordinators' Retreat. With guidance from Veronica Boix-Mansilla, a researcher with Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, we are exploring ways to adapt materials from *The Evidence Process*, a collaborative approach to examining student learning. We aim to figure out how to assess the integrative learning that learning communities make possible, in a manner that strengthens collaborative learning among faculty and supports campus-based scholarship of teaching and learning initiatives.

We continue to appreciate the work of colleagues near and far, and the occasions when our paths cross on campuses and cities across the country. We look forward to learning more about the work you are doing on behalf of all students.

*Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich*

# Emerging Trends in Learning Community Development

Barbara Leigh Smith, Kimberly Eby, Robin Jeffers, Judy Kjellman, Gordon Koestler, Toska Olson, Rita Smilkstein, Karen Spear



All of us acted as scouts to discover emerging trends in learning community development by following themes at the May 2004 National Learning Communities conference in Seattle, Washington, and by interviewing faculty, staff, and administrators involved in the Pew Charitable Trusts-funded National Project. This article reports our observations.

## Trend #1

### Learning communities are increasingly situated in critical places and reach large numbers of students

In the last fifteen years learning communities have become a national movement reaching more than 600 educational institutions. While the size and structure of the programs vary, learning communities are now common in all types of institutions—research universities, community colleges, and liberal arts colleges. Some programs are just getting started, but many have been in place for more than a decade. Learning communities are “now part of the vocabulary of higher education,” as Vincent Tinto put it. Learning community fellows Jodi Levine Laufgraben and Maria Hesse noted that the shared understanding of learning community purposes and practices has significantly expanded in recent years as a result of new resources, websites, texts, conferences, and regional hubs of learning community practitioners.

The movement has become large-scale partly because the concept of learning communities is adaptable, easily tailored to different institutional environments and needs. But learning communities have also flourished because they provide an affordable and comprehensive means of addressing a variety of issues: improving student retention, promoting student success and engagement,

fostering curricular coherence, building community, and promoting student learning. They also address faculty needs for learning and innovation as well as their desire for more collaborative and collegial work environments.

While many early learning communities begin as the brainchild of innovative individuals—often referred to as “early adopters” in the innovation literature—an increasing number are now institutional initiatives strategically located to address specific issues. This move from being an individual initiative to an institutional initiative is important if the innovation is to reach substantial numbers of students and garner the institutional support needed to thrive. Many innovations that fail to “scale up” remain on the margins and wither as the early adopters retire or move on to other work.

Learning communities are increasingly situated in critical places and reach large numbers of students. In fact, discussions about where to situate learning communities are helping us become more knowledgeable about the most critical points in the curriculum: particular “trouble spots” such as courses with high failure rates, and challenging transition points such as developmental education to college level (Malnarich et al. 2003, 44). Common arenas for learning community work include the following:

1. **The first term of college.** An overwhelming number of learning communities are first-year initiatives designed to help students make the transition to college and to improve student retention. This focus on the first year is understandable since attrition rates are particularly high in this year. Especially common in universities, many of these learning communities are built around first-year

seminars which have become ubiquitous. Interest in living-learning communities has also been growing as many creative programs are linked to residence life.

2. An increasing number of institutions are going beyond first-year initiatives to design learning communities as part of their **general education** program to improve curricular coherence, build community, and enhance deep learning. While many of the learning community programs are quarter-long, a number of institutions such as Wagner College, Skagit Valley Community College, Portland State University, California State University-East Bay (formerly CSU-Hayward), the University of North Dakota, the Quanta program at Daytona Beach Community College, and New Century College at George Mason University require multi-term learning communities as part of a multi-year general education program.

3. A number of institutions are building learning communities in **developmental education** and basic studies, an area of dramatic under-performance in higher education (Malnarich et al. 2003). Prominent observers often describe learning communities as a “best practice” in developmental education. With some notable exceptions (such as Grossmont, Kingsborough, and La Guardia community colleges), these programs are usually small-scale innovative pilots that live alongside traditional approaches. Bringing these effective efforts to scale has the potential for substantially improving this area of the curriculum. A new major study of learning communities and developmental education at nineteen two- and four-year colleges and universities by Syracuse University’s Vince Tinto, Cathy Engstrom, Cerri Banks, Stacey Riemer, and Rich Shintaku is likely to further fuel efforts in this important arena. Preliminary results indicate that “learning communities are highly successful in creating

a serious sense of academic purpose and encouraging high levels of student responsibility and engagement.” The study will also provide insight into “powerful practices/organizational structures/cultural norms being used that promote student responsibility for their learning and student success” (Tinto et al. 2005).

Learning communities aim to reverse the essential passivity of a cynical world view by giving students the opportunity to discover and use a voice for participating in a social change agenda.

4. Learning communities are becoming more common in **the major**. Some institutions, such as Wagner College and New Century College, are utilizing learning communities throughout the student’s undergraduate career in both general education and the major. While disciplines in the liberal arts are the most common arena for learning community development, they are also found in professional programs such as allied health, nursing, and business. Engineering is leading the pack

in terms of professional areas embracing learning communities. Though still an under-represented area, the sciences are increasingly involved in learning communities. Judy Kjellman and Gordon Koestler report that the learning community approach supports what we know about how students learn science: “There is mounting evidence that supplementing or replacing lectures with active learning strategies and engaging students in discovery and the scientific process improves learning and knowledge retention” (Handelsman et al. 2004, 521).

5. Many learning communities now focus on courses that operate as “**gateways**” to the major. Gateway courses often act as critical filter courses or, more bluntly, graveyards where too many students are lost. These gateway courses are easily identified as courses with large numbers of students with grades of D and F and high withdrawal and repeat rates, regardless of instructor. Learning communities situated in these gateway courses often dramatically increase the student success rate by providing students with more time on task, an increased

sense of engagement, and a supportive community of peers. Supplemental instruction is often used in these programs as well.

6. Learning communities are also being situated around the needs of **special populations**, especially groups traditionally under-represented in higher education. Many of these efforts have found support through Federal Title III and Title V Department of Education programs. As the related article in this issue of the newsletter points out, learning community development in the Historically Black Colleges and Universities has increased dramatically in recent years and the sciences are a focus of a number of these programs. Institutions that serve Hispanic populations, such as the University of Texas-El Paso and Western New Mexico University, are leaders in this area as well. At Western Washington University/Fairhaven College an outstanding learning community program called the “Law and Diversity Program” prepares students of color for law school.

7. Learning community programs are just starting to emerge that are **inter-institutional collaborations** aimed at enhancing transfer and degree completion or early college/high school/college programs. The transition points between the different sectors in the education pipeline are known to be trouble spots for many students. Portland State University, for example, offers learning community programs in area high schools. The Evergreen State College/Tacoma Community College community-based program in Tacoma is an example of an inter-institutional program designed to increase baccalaureate completion rates. A similar partnership between Evergreen and a variety of Washington community colleges on six Native American reservations includes face-to-face interaction known to promote student success along with online courses.

### **Trend #2** **Strong learning communities are designed around core practices that promote student learning**

The most effective learning communities go considerably beyond simply linking courses and putting students in a cohort. Rather, they intentionally build a

learning environment around core practices known to promote student learning. Five common core practices include:

- adopting pedagogical strategies of student engagement and active learning (e.g., collaborative and cooperative learning, use of discussion groups and seminars, inquiry-based field work)
- fostering deeper learning and critical thinking by helping students integrate knowledge and perceive relationships and connections (e.g., through interdisciplinary curriculum; thematic curriculum; integrative projects, activities and assignments)
- purposeful building of a sense of community among students along with the skills for working with others (e.g., through strategies such as living-learning communities, academic projects that involve teamwork, study groups, social events, service-learning, etc.)
- providing occasions for reflection and assessment, (e.g., use of classroom assessment techniques, student self-evaluations, reflective journals, autobiography)
- respecting and cultivating diversity in the learning community (e.g., using pedagogical strategies of inclusion that support diverse ways of learning, creating supportive learning environments, representing diversity in the curriculum content, situating learning communities to serve students with diverse backgrounds)

Learning communities vary considerably in the ways they develop these core practices. Nevertheless, in designing learning communities, it is useful to ask where the sites are for each of these core practices, and who is responsible for promoting them.

As Kimberly Eby and Karen Spear note, a continuing theme in American educational reform is preparing students for participation in a democratic society. Many learning communities frame their work around educating students for democratic pluralism and civic engagement. Learning communities are a major thread in the history of educational reform because they aim to provide students with *direct experience*, practice in what Terry Tempest Williams calls “the open space of democracy”

(2004). More specifically, they aim to reverse the essential passivity of a cynical worldview by giving students the opportunity to discover and use a voice for participating in a social change agenda. They offer a site for inclusiveness and connectedness rather than isolation so students connect with each other and experience the mutuality of human affairs. As a reform movement, learning community work at its best involves cultivating the habits of reflection and engagement necessary to know and act in a truly democratic world.

This emphasis on cultivating habits of civic engagement often influences learning community designs based on these core practices. It means clearly recognizing that *how* we practice our work is as important as *what* we actually do since both the implicit and explicit curriculum in a democratic classroom matter. This requires striving to create an authentic community in the classroom that attends to both affective and cognitive aspects of student development and learning. These programs typically nurture sustained reflective practice and often use community-based experiential learning as a means to educate students for democratic pluralism.

### **Trend #3** **Learning communities are becoming a convergence zone for reform efforts in undergraduate education**

One of the most promising trends is the emergence of connections among various reform efforts in undergraduate education. On some campuses, the Carnegie Foundation's Scholarship of Teaching and Learning National Initiative provides a conceptual framework for unifying these efforts. Burgeoning interest in faculty learning communities as a way of bringing faculty together to learn about new approaches to teaching and learning is also a supportive allied reform effort.

Learning communities have become a convergence zone for the various "pedagogies of engagement." This is not surprising since many reform efforts share common assumptions about what promotes learning, and the structure of learning communities provides space for these other approaches to flourish. Service-learning, for example, is often a component of learning community programs, as are collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and various "across the curriculum" efforts in

writing, reading, speaking, quantitative reasoning, and technology. The interdisciplinary nature of many learning communities facilitates connections. Major reform efforts in the sciences, for example, are natural companions because of their stress on community-building and inquiry-based approaches to learning. Diversity and developmental education reform efforts are also finding the learning community approach a fertile strategy.

There are many good reasons for connecting these related enterprises. First and foremost, these efforts can strengthen one another. Each has a substantial base of expertise and a strong literature that can often deepen the work of related change initiatives. Sometimes combining approaches is quite simply more effective. New research indicates that combining learning communities with first-year seminars is more effective than stand-alone first-year seminars (Swing 2004). In addition, too many unrelated reform efforts running on separate tracks can dissipate faculty energy and compete for resources. New Century College at George Mason University, Portland State University, St. Lawrence University, Collin County Community College, and the Seattle Community Colleges District are just a few of the many institutions utilizing learning communities as a convergence zone for various reforms in undergraduate education. As President of Wagner College Richard Guarasci notes, learning communities are an efficient way of addressing various goals at once. Cultivating an appreciation for diversity, for example, is best done experientially and a well-designed learning community can address these goals while also addressing other general education objectives (Lardner et al. 2005).

### **Trend #4** **Learning communities are remaking institutional roles and relationships**

Many learning communities are recasting traditional roles and relationships and developing new notions of who can be a teacher and what that role entails. "The central focus of this movement has been on the changing perceptions of student learning" (James and Klippenstein 2002). It is increasingly recognized that student learning, historically seen as classroom and faculty-centered, is influenced by a variety of out-of-classroom factors as well

and that learning can be enhanced through the purposeful creation of learning opportunities throughout the campus. This broader concept of student learning dramatically opens up our notions of who can be a teacher. As a result, productive learning community partnerships are being forged that involve faculty members, student affairs professionals, librarians, and community-based partners. Key to these endeavors is a collaborative process and the careful nurturing of a climate of respect. Many campuses' learning community advisory and steering committees are cross-divisional, including all the campus (and sometimes off campus) educators who teach in and are advocates for learning communities.

Many learning community teams involve librarians in recognition of the central importance of information literacy in undergraduate education (Pedersen 2003). However, partnerships between academic and student affairs are the most common type of partnership and they take many forms, depending on the nature of the campus. Living-learning communities re-emerged in the 1990s as one strong approach. Especially common at major research universities, living-learning communities try to promote seamless learning by bringing the formal curriculum and the informal co-curriculum together.

Building a student culture engaged with a supportive peer environment in learning inside and outside the classroom is especially important in large institutions. At the University of Michigan, for example, learning communities are promoted as an approach that has the best of both worlds—the richness of a research university and the benefits of being part of a small community. At many research universities such as the University of Wisconsin, Arizona State University, Bowling Green University, Indiana University, and the University of Colorado students enjoy opportunities to participate in a wide variety of learning community programs.

Carefully articulated learning community programs often build student affairs professionals directly into the curriculum. As Vince Tinto and his colleagues note in their recent study of learning communities in developmental education, “learning communities provided students a web/network of critical academic resources that have proven essential to their success.

These programs typically immerse counselors/advisors INTO the classes so advising is more visible, systematic, and ongoing ... We found that students will take advantage of these resources IF they are required during the LC experience ... and they are continuing to use these services after the first semester/quarter experience” (Tinto et al. 2005).

One of the most dynamic aspects of many learning communities involves using students in major leadership roles. In many first-year learning community initiatives, for example, undergraduate or graduate students lead the integrating seminar. Research at University of California-Los Angeles and other institutions indicates that student peer mentors are highly effective, but training is important (Benjamin 2003).

#### **Trend #5 Learning community assessment, increasingly sophisticated, demonstrates effectiveness, but more focus is needed on student learning**

Learning community assessment, like assessment in higher education in general, shows growing strength but still has a long way to go in portraying and supporting student learning and in being used to improve institutional performance. Nonetheless, many fellows noted the value of assessment. Speaking from an institution deeply invested in assessment, Portland State University, learning community fellow Judy Patton sees assessment “as a fertile strategy for program improvement that can help uncover assumptions about teaching and learning and answer questions about whether the innovations are getting the intended results.”

The National Learning Community Project completed a review of more than 100 studies of learning communities (Taylor et al. 2003). The vast majority were single institution studies, but the review also included dissertations, formal research studies, and multi-institution studies. Overall, the results were positive. Retention, academic success, and student satisfaction are generally higher for learning community participants in nearly all the reports. Learning community interventions with under-prepared students have been largely successful in helping students persist and succeed academically.

### Local Studies

Four-year colleges and universities are most active in assessing learning communities and the approaches used are often a combination of locally-developed instruments and national surveys. Nevertheless, the outcomes assessed are generally those most easily measured. As learning community fellow Frankie Minor reported, “most of the current work has been institutionally specific, outcomes-based assessment related to the increased retention and academic success of students. Less common are efforts to examine other aspects of students’ learning and intellectual development.” Much of the research needs to extend beyond the traditional measurement of retention and academic success to fully understand what makes a difference in learning communities. Most of the research has focused on learning communities in the freshman year. And, as Robin Jeffers noted after attending numerous sessions on assessment at the national conference, there is still too little faculty involvement in assessment and too little focus on student learning. Portland State University is a too rare example of an institution with deep faculty involvement in assessing student learning, especially with electronic portfolios.

### National Studies

While most assessment work is appropriately local and focused on single institutions, three significant national studies have recently appeared. Vince Tinto and a team of researchers at Syracuse University have used an adapted version of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement and in-depth case studies to investigate nineteen developmental education programs in two- and four-year colleges (Tinto et al. 2005). This Lumina Foundation-funded study’s initial results are highly promising, demonstrating that learning communities have many affective impacts in terms of student’s self-concepts, sense of belonging and engagement, study skill development, and success in navigating the transition to college. The research is a step forward in terms of suggesting not only effective practices but also ineffective practices.

A second study disaggregated results from the National Survey of Student Engagement, an annual survey of more

than 300 four-year colleges, and found that participation in learning communities is positively related to all five of their benchmarks: diversity experiences, gains in personal and social development, practical competence, general education, and overall satisfaction with the undergraduate experience (Zhao and Kuh 2003).

A third study, the 2004 National Study of Living-Learning Programs sponsored by ACUHO-I, looked at living-learning programs on thirty-four campuses.<sup>1</sup> Karen Inkelas and her colleagues, Aaron Brower and Scott Crawford, indicated that students in living-learning communities report greater enjoyment of challenging intellectual pursuits, significantly more interactions with faculty and peers, and a greater sense of civic engagement. This survey also indicated that living-learning communities help students make the transition to college.<sup>2</sup>

### Assessment for Planning and Improvement

It is important to observe how learning community assessment is being used to plan and improve programs. An increasing number of campuses are embracing focused assessment and data-driven planning to situate, design, and evaluate their learning communities. At Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) a cross-divisional planning team drawn from academic and student affairs uses data to determine where learning communities and other innovations might best be situated to address institutional problems and enhance student achievement.

More campuses are reporting that they use assessment information for program improvement. For example, at IUPUI, assessment led to a variety of changes including a move from block scheduling through mechanically linked courses to thematic learning communities; and, at Western New Mexico University, assessment led to the creation of centralized advising systems, and improved support systems for learning communities. In a similar vein, Estela Mara Bensimon from the University of Southern California suggested at the national learning community conference that developing a diversity scorecard can usefully engage a campus in defining institutional needs, setting goals, and planning strategic interventions.<sup>3</sup>

## Trend #6

### Greater attention is being paid to crucial factors in sustaining learning communities

As Toska Olson notes, there are a variety of contemporary challenges to learning community sustainability, ranging from the macro-level environment outside the institution to the micro-level experiences of individuals within particular institutions. On the macro level are the related challenges of the country's economic health, the political climate about education, and granting agencies' interests in broader funding for learning communities and innovations for teaching. All institutions are operating within a context of limited resources in which decisions and changes are increasingly driven by the need for accountability to legislators, reaccreditation agencies, and funders.

Various internal factors influence learning community sustainability, including how integrated the learning communities are into the institutional culture, the effectiveness with which all learning community stakeholders communicate and collaborate, the funding available to support recruitment and coordination of learning community programs, and how well institutions address concerns about tenure and promotion decisions in departments that may not value participation in learning communities. These internal factors may become challenges to learning community sustainability unless learning communities are strongly supported in the institution.

The demographic characteristics of an institution may also affect the sustainability of its learning communities. A school that serves a high proportion of commuters, part-time students, or students who desire specific vocational training may need to be especially creative in its design of various learning community programs. Alma Clayton-Pederson from the Association of American Colleges and Universities also suggests that institutions embed learning communities into their career path programs and into the stable, required curriculum so the learning communities are less vulnerable to changes in the funding atmosphere. Organizing learning communities around popular classes and graduation requirements will also enhance student enrollment in these programs.

The characteristics of an institution's faculty also influence the sustainability of its learning community

program. An institution will be more successful if it has a large number of faculty who are able and willing to devote the time and energy to develop and maintain learning communities. Stage of career is important here, both in terms of tenure pressures and institutional culture (e.g., whether innovative teaching is rewarded within the institution), and also because mid-career faculty tend to be more developmentally ready for creative and collaborative experiences. Shari Ellertson's research (2004) on mid-career faculty concluded that these faculty are more likely to be looking for new challenges and opportunities for revitalization than either newer faculty or those closer to retirement.

Site visits to nearly one hundred campuses participating in the National Learning Community Project from 1998 to 2004 indicated a recurring pattern of key elements in sustaining successful learning community programs. (See table below.)

At the same time, it is obvious that learning communities go through different stages of development. In the beginning stages, technical challenges of student and faculty recruitment, marketing, and registration are often at the forefront. As fellows Bruce Koller and Connie

#### Key Elements in Learning Community Sustainability

1. Clear and well-understood mission, vision, and goals.
2. Committed leadership, wide connections, solid volunteer workforce.
3. Purposeful and well-implemented curriculum, pedagogy and structure.
4. Appropriate and ubiquitous assessment.
5. Ongoing, well-subscribed formal and informal instructional development for both faculty and staff.
6. Staff and faculty rewards and incentives commensurate with the valuable contribution learning communities make to student learning and success, faculty and staff development, and institutional transformation.
7. Cross-divisional continuous attention to implementation issues, e.g., recruitment, marketing, advising, registration, student assignment into residential learning communities.
8. Sustained and adequate mixture of resources to enable the above.

Kubo Della-Piana point out, whatever can go wrong will, and the administrative and logistical issues are the most unthankful side of starting learning communities, but they make the dream and scale-up possible.

As efforts mature and the planning and delivery challenges are mastered, learning communities often begin to focus on questions of sustainability and impact. At this point many institutions revisit fundamental questions about goals and objectives. A number of the longer established programs are gearing up to enter a new phase of development with more ambitious goals and learning community designs.

We believe this reappraisal and rising to higher expectations is a sign of the learning community movement's ongoing vitality. At IUPUI, for example, they have moved from a pervasive freshman seminar student success initiative to a thematic learning community with higher levels of faculty involvement and curriculum integration. Most of the longer established learning communities are now facing the classic challenges of second-stage reform efforts. Faculty retirement and succession are key challenges since many of the early leaders are now retiring. Other issues include bringing the learning community effort to scale to serve larger numbers of students, developing cost-effective approaches in a time of limited resources, and offering programs that genuinely promote deep learning. ♦

#### Notes

1. Source: [www.livelearnstudy.net](http://www.livelearnstudy.net).
2. Source: [www.livelearnstudy.net/images/LLRC\\_plenary\\_address.pdf](http://www.livelearnstudy.net/images/LLRC_plenary_address.pdf)
3. For information on the diversity scorecard, see [www.usc.edu/dept/education/CUE/diversityscorecard.htm](http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CUE/diversityscorecard.htm).

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# Learning Communities Growing in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Phyllis Worthy Dawkins  
Johnson C. Smith University

**S**ince the 1980s, faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)<sup>1</sup> have been engaged in a number of faculty development activities. During a ten-year grant program, sponsored by the Bush Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, developing learning communities to strengthen student learning and increase retention was one of many project activities undertaken by some of the twenty-three participating black colleges.

## HBCU Faculty Development Network

The HBCU Faculty Development Network represents the 105 HBCUs that are committed to promoting effective teaching and student learning through a variety of collaborative activities focusing on faculty enhancement. The Network sponsors the Annual HBCU Faculty Development Symposium and annual summer institutes. In July 2002, the HBCU Faculty Development Network organized its first summer institute on learning communities at Johnson C. Smith University. Campus teams from Johnson C. Smith University, Central State University, North Carolina A&T State University, Benedict College, and Florida Memorial participated in the institute.

As a result of participating in the summer institute, Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, implemented a learning community program in physiology classes and other programs on campus. The students in the program have been engaged in study research groups and faculty are using some of the pedagogical strategies learned at the institute. Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio, is using a cluster model at the freshman level and for their business and

education majors. Florida Memorial College in Miami has established a pilot group to kick off their program of freshman learning communities. North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro offers a variety of learning community programs, including Residential Learning Communities in collaboration with Career Explorations, and Undeclared Majors Freshman Pilot Learning Communities sponsored by The Center for Student Success (TCSS). In fall 2004, TCSS introduced the ASPIRE learning community to thirty at-risk, incoming undeclared freshmen while thirty at-risk, first-year undeclared students participated in a comparison group. The ASPIRE learning community model is a paired course (the same cohort of students enrolled in the same two courses and faculty work across disciplines to integrate curricular and co-curricular learning). Director of TCSS Rita Lamb stated, "Our team is enthusiastic about the positive impact learning communities are having in facilitating students' success and connection to the university community." North Carolina State A&T is also developing learning communities for engineering and technology programs.

Tougaloo College is in its fourth year of learning communities operation, averaging four learning communities a semester. Pairs of faculty from diverse disciplines coordinate their class assignments and promote small group research and presentations with mixed groups of students at the freshman level (from the two linked classes) and in the major. The learning communities also involve co-curricular activities including field trips, social gatherings, and group meals.

Johnson C. Smith University of Charlotte, North Carolina, began offering learning communities with a

Bush-Hewlett Grant in 1998. Since then, we have developed linked courses at the freshman level and in the majors, including links between communication arts and history; African and African American studies; management and accounting; health and physical education methods; Spanish and economics; criminal justice and sociology. We also have clustered learning communities in freshman studies, elementary education, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and in our Honors College. We institutionalized our Freshman Studies learning communities with our Title III grant and in fall 2005, all first-year students at JCSU were enrolled in blocked courses with integrated assignments.

### National Learning Communities Summer Institutes at Evergreen

To date, three HBCUs—Johnson C. Smith University, Tougaloo College, and Bethune-Cookman College—participated in the National Summer Institutes on Learning Communities at Evergreen. Bethune-Cookman College established its first learning community in 1995, building upon the successful REV (Renewing Ethical Values) freshman seminars that had been developed by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. This learning community, known as *Jump Start*, focused on linking developmental courses in English and reading with required courses in African American history and a freshman seminar, and proved to be both successful and popular with students and faculty. Students who met departmental standards were able to “jump start” their college careers.

### Future Projects

Bennett College is moving forward with its learning communities. A summer institute for faculty, led by Helen Gillotte-Tropp from San Francisco State University and John O’Connor from George Mason University, and a fall faculty development workshop, led by Joni Petschauer of Appalachian State University, helped faculty see how to create a transition for first-year students entering college and the related need for pedagogical reform. As a result of the emphasis on faculty development, student retention, and an increase in students’ GPAs at Bennett,

six paired, thematically-linked courses were launched in the spring of 2005. Each learning community includes collaborative activities and a service-learning project.

Under a three-year FIPSE grant, Howard University, Jackson State University, Xavier University of Louisiana and Talladega College are exploring learning communities in STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) along with faculty learning communities to look at strategies for improving teaching and learning. The project objectives are to improve African American academic achievement and participation in STEM fields, and also, through faculty learning communities, to connect these HBCUs to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning movement.

Of the 105 HBCUs, fourteen institutions (13 percent) are growing or refining their learning communities: Benedict College, Bennett College, Bethune-Cookman College, Central State University, Florida Memorial College, Hampton University, Howard University, Jackson State University, Johnson C. Smith University, North Carolina A&T State University, St. Augustine’s College, Talladega College, Tougaloo College, and Xavier University, and eight institutions are exploring or are in the early stages of implementing learning communities: Barber Scotia College, Claflin College, Fayetteville State University, Miles College, Morris College, Tennessee State University, and Tuskegee University of the District of Columbia. In the next five years, it is conceivable that at least 30 percent of the HBCUs will implement learning communities on their campuses. ✦

### Notes

1. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as “any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans.” HBCUs offer all students, regardless of race, an opportunity to develop their skills and talents. These institutions train young people who go on to serve domestically and internationally in the professions as entrepreneurs and in the public and private sectors. The majority of HBCUs are located in the Southeastern states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands. They include forty public four-year, eleven public two-year, forty-nine private four-year, and five private two-year institutions.

# Minority Student Enrollment and Multicultural Learning Communities at Purdue University

Matthew D. Pistilli  
Purdue University



A new first-year student enters a large sociology course on the first day of class and discovers he is the sole African American male in the room. While not a discussion course, the instructor frequently asks students for their perspectives on issues, and often encourages students to ask each other for different opinions. Invariably, this student is always asked for “the Black male view.” While the requests are well intentioned, they build and reinforce a “man alone” notion. Instead of feeling included or privileged, the lone African American student feels alienated and singled out. He is thrust into the role of “speaker for his race and gender”—a responsibility he neither asked for nor wants.

Some may think that the scene described above could only occur if the instructor and his/her students were simply clueless. Others might think that this scenario is a standard but seldom occurring cliché—particularly since we live in an era where diversity education and awareness are stressed. Experience suggests otherwise.

Minority student enrollment at most institutions of higher education is far below that of Caucasian students. By 2015, only Asian Americans will attend college at a rate greater than their share of the 18- to 24-year-old United States population (Carnevale and Fry 2000). In the next fifteen to twenty years, thirty-one states are expected to have minority enrollments of less than 30 percent, even though students from the four federally-designated minority groups are projected to collectively outnumber whites (ibid). Knowing this, how do we support students of color, as well as majority students, and provide educational environments that promote community building in academic, residential, and social settings? One answer is learning communities.

In 1999, Purdue University launched its first two

learning communities with forty-six students. By fall 2005, nearly 1,500 students participated in forty-five learning communities from courses that enrolled twenty to thirty students in two or more courses to groups of thirty to 130 students with a common academic major or program who live together in a residence hall. Instructors typically link their curricula and provide co-curricular programming to enhance classroom learning and opportunities for social interaction between students and instructors. The first-to-second year and cumulative retention rates for participants are 2 percentage points higher than for students who chose not to participate in learning communities.

The positive impact of learning communities on students of color and women is even greater. Minorities constitute a larger portion of learning community participants (17 percent) than are represented in the total campus undergraduate population (12 percent). Minority students also constitute nearly 24 percent of all students participating in a learning community. First-to-second year retention rate for the 2003–04 cohort is four percentage points higher than it is for their non-participating minority counterparts. This retention gain though does *not* last long and drops to that of their non-participating counterparts after second-to-third year retention rates are calculated. This trend was not expected; studies on learning communities around the country have indicated that participation in learning communities lead to student satisfaction and success, resulting in higher retention rates.

To counteract this trend, staff members at Purdue created Multicultural Learning Communities (MLCs), wherein a cohort of students take courses and share a residential experience rich in multicultural content and

activities that enhance minority participants' academic experiences and passion for learning while exposing other students to a more diverse learning experience.

Regardless of ethnicity, our research shows that participants in a MLC have a greater appreciation and respect for different perspectives and cultures when compared to non-participants. Retention rates for the first cohort of students are impressive with students retained into their second year at a rate of 88 percent compared to 84 percent for students from the same academic programs not participating in a learning community. Again, the rates are more dramatic for minority students who had a 90 percent retention rate compared to an 80 percent rate for minority students from the same programs not in a learning community. Clearly, MLCs make a difference.

By creating a learning environment that celebrates differences while stressing similarities, and examines the contributions of the cultures that comprise our campus, state, nation, and world, the MLCs help all students experience greater success in their new postsecondary home. We expect that MLC students will be more likely to stay in and complete college. When leaving with their degrees, they will also be better equipped to contribute to Indiana's and America's diverse society.

While it is clear that we need to enroll more minority students in higher education (and to support them once they arrive on campus through such programs as learning communities) we have not examined why the few minority students who do come to campus enroll in learning communities at rates higher than that of their proportion at the university. There are several possible explanations for this phenomena, though none are conclusive.

Minority students may have high levels of participation in learning communities because the emphasis placed on community connects with many students' cultural backgrounds. It seems likely that students would seek out opportunities to create small, close-knit environments similar to those experienced in their pre-collegiate home lives, especially in an environment where there are 31,000 undergraduate students.

Another aspect that may explain higher learning community enrollment stems from students' desire to do well academically. While learning community students

at Purdue, in general, are no different from non-learning community students with regard to high school GPA, class rank, and standardized test scores, the expected outcomes of learning community participation create an attractive "value-added" addition to college experience. Participating students tend to do better in their course work than their non-participating peers, and longitudinal data also indicates that they graduate from college at higher rates.

A third component that may contribute to higher enrollment involves recruitment efforts. Purdue sends out its learning community brochure to all admitted students. Targeted mailings, personalized to each student and generally sent by a department head or dean, encourage students in various programs to consider learning communities as a curricular option. The letter to the student is followed a few days later by a letter to the student's family, encouraging the family to talk with the student about the options available at Purdue University. Many times staff working with Purdue's learning communities will hear students say that they got a letter from the dean telling them about a learning community, and now they want to sign up.

Even though it is impossible to say with certainty why minority students are enrolling in learning communities at rates higher than their proportion at Purdue, the fact is they are enrolling; they also remain a very small percentage of all students at Purdue. Support needs to be given to minority students, and all students, to encourage them to succeed in their courses and to ultimately graduate from Purdue. Additional research needs to be done to determine how to best provide support, and what kinds of support to provide, so that initially high retention rates do not diminish, and, further, how to translate successes seen in learning communities to other programs. Situations like the one described at the beginning of this article should not occur, and whatever we can do to ensure that they do not is vital to the success of all minority students on our campuses. ♦

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# Building and Assessing a Learning Communities Program at Northeastern Illinois University

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For the last several years, Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU)—a commuter institution on the northwest side of Chicago with approximately 11,300 students enrolled in fall 2003—has been judged by *U.S. News and World Report* to be the most culturally diverse university in the Midwest. NEIU is the only federally designated four-year Hispanic Serving Institution in the state of Illinois. A recent undergraduate profile was 29 percent Latino/a, 13 percent African American, 12 percent Asian, and 43 percent European American. In a survey conducted by the Cooperative Institution Research Programs (CIRP), 78 percent of responding NEIU freshmen indicated that they were first generation college students and 46 percent reported that English was not their first language. In national comparisons, NEIU students were more likely than other surveyed students to work part-time off campus, to work full-time during college, and to have serious concerns about their ability to finance their college education. In a recent comparison, NEIU was thirteenth in the nation in the awarding of undergraduate education degrees to Latinos/as, and twentieth in the nation for Liberal Arts and Sciences degrees to Latinos/as.

After several years of sporadic and isolated experiments with learning communities, and the use of linked general education course cohorts to enhance teacher preparation in the College of Education, a unique opportunity to build a learning communities program presented itself in fall 2001. The availability of reasonable financial support—both from the state legislature and from a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant (HI-20881-01) to increase learning communities available to students taking humanities courses—and the strong encouragement of high-level administrators got the initiative off the ground. Two faculty co-directors and

college administrators proceeded to design a program of faculty development, ongoing support, and substantial commitment to thorough assessment of the outcomes of the initiative.<sup>1</sup> The goals of the learning communities program supported the broader university goals of promoting teaching excellence, recruiting and retaining a diverse student body, and fostering student-centered learning. The success of the program has led NEIU to ask whether a long-term commitment to learning communities would be a solid fit with the institution, its culture, and its dedication to providing “access and excellence” to its student population.

The 2002–03 academic year was targeted for the offering of ten to fifteen learning communities based within NEIU’s College of Arts and Sciences. The hope was to sustain that level in the following academic year. With the December 2001 appointment of the first two faculty co-directors of the initiative, a number of meetings were held to raise the level of awareness among faculty and to help match up interested colleagues. Those educational and promotional activities led to three-day faculty workshops, the first held in May 2002 (and repeated annually in May). There, instructors committed to establishing specific learning communities for the following academic year could work with their partners on a number of design elements while receiving the logistical and experiential support needed to sustain their enthusiasm. Follow-up workshops and brown bag lunch sessions provided additional support to participating faculty. The resulting twelve successful learning communities in the 2002–03 academic year, and the thirteen learning communities in 2003–04, each enrolling about 200 students, provide an institutional base both for assessing what learning communities have to offer to

successful student learning at NEIU and whether and how those contributions can be cost effective.

Learning communities—a powerful pedagogy—are widely misunderstood, distrusted, or avoided because of real or perceived costs, and because their asserted benefits remain largely anecdotal or are dismissed as inappropriate or unworkable in “our institutional culture.” One measure of the success of the NEIU initiative is the number of students registered in learning community sections. Another measure is the documented and anecdotal evidence of enthusiasm of faculty involved in the initiative. A third is assessment data collected from a pre- and post-experience protocol—including extensive student demographic data, along with items rating student experiences in their respective learning communities. Student tracking data will add to this assessment database in subsequent years. The final measure of success is further institutionalization of the current program, leading to sustained commitment with continued and expanding faculty involvement.

### Faculty Development and Curricular Models

Faculty development has been an essential ingredient of the success of the learning communities program at NEIU. Faculty participation in workshops has included tenured, tenure-track, visiting, and part-time instructors representing twelve different disciplines within the College of Arts and Sciences as well as several academic development and education programs. The learning communities formed in the first two years of the NEIU program have typically linked two three-credit courses and represent a potpourri of combinations.<sup>2</sup> The most common models have combined two general education courses such as introductory sociology with linguistics (*Language and Society*) or a general education course such as cultural anthropology with a college study skills-based freshman seminar (*Cultures and College Skills*) or two developmental courses, such as developmental writing and a college skills seminar with Proyecto Pa’Lante and Project Success, two special university programs designed for selected Latino, African American, and inner-city students who might not meet all the

requirements for general admission.

In both 2002 and 2003, there were two separate three-day faculty development workshops to accommodate the large number of participating faculty. During the workshop, faculty heard presentations on subjects such as collaborative teaching or technology-assisted learning, received materials and templates, and spent significant amounts of work time with their partners, making substantial progress on the five documents they were expected to produce by the end of summer: a title and descriptive paragraph for their learning community; one promotional item, such as a flyer; a welcome letter and/or contract to be signed by their students; a joint assignment that integrated the linked courses of their learning community; and one assessment activity to gauge student learning. These mandatory May workshops were followed by optional August workshops on topics such as writing in learning communities and assessment of learning communities, as well as a mid-semester lunch session that allowed participating faculty an opportunity to report on the highs and lows of their collaborative experiences up to that point.

Learning communities at NEIU aim at supporting the success of diverse learners. The faculty development workshops that are part of the learning communities program aim to be a place where good teaching practices can be developed and shared. This work is also supported by NEIU’s Center for Teaching and Learning. Examples of good practices in NEIU learning communities include: joint writing projects and other assignments that integrate course themes in the learning community; more overall emphasis on college writing including the process of revision; the use of web discussion boards and e-journals<sup>3</sup> to help students interact with each other throughout the semester as they make connections among the linked courses; the encouragement of small-group work and peer evaluations; and the inclusion of guest speakers and field trips, made more feasible by the longer and more flexible class times afforded by learning communities.

Learning communities at NEIU create opportunities for significant learning. For instance, students in the “Rocknomics” learning community, linking classes in earth science and economics, were asked to employ both

economics and earth science analysis in projects dealing with different environmental issues. The *Becoming Students and Citizens* learning community linked English composition, American government, and a college skills seminar. The final joint writing assignment asked students to identify a social problem about which they cared and to propose a solution. All three professors worked with students on this project and participated in the evaluation of the papers. Students also presented their papers to the whole group at a final class party. In the *Demystifying Language and College* learning community, linking introductory linguistics and a freshman seminar, early semester joint assignments dealt with note-taking skills and Internet research. Finally, in a learning community linking sociology and history courses around a Latin American theme, taught at an NEIU satellite campus serving predominantly Latino students, class members were asked in one of their integrated writing assignments to imagine that they were a Mayan woman who immigrated from Chiapas, Mexico, to Chicago. Students were expected to draw on both their history and sociology readings to complete this assignment.

### **Institutionalizing an initiative into a program**

One obvious demonstration of the value of learning communities is improved student retention. At NEIU, as across American institutions of higher learning, student retention has been an enduring challenge. Unfortunately, data demonstrating the positive effects of learning communities on retention at other institutions has not always been persuasive to NEIU administrators and faculty. We now have data documenting the positive impacts of learning communities at our institution. For instance, NEIU general education students who were part of learning communities in fall 2002 were more likely to persist to the following semester and the following year than similar students in non-learning-community general education courses. In a separate analysis of minority student retention, the results were similarly positive as 94 percent of Latino students and 91 percent of African American students in fall 2002 learning communities persisted to the spring 2003 semester.

In the fall 2002 assessment protocol, there were no

comparative data from students in regular general education classes so it was impossible to know whether learning community patterns were similar to or different from those of NEIU students in regular class sections. Fall 2003 student survey data did include student survey responses from ten matched general education sections, and these baseline data revealed some interesting findings. For instance, twenty-one items asked whether “Taking this class increased the degree to which I improved my ability to . . .” Responses were a four-item scale, moving from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.”

On all items, the “Strongly Agree” response rates were higher for learning community students than those in the non-learning-community sections. On sixteen, the learning community responses were from twice as high to seven times as high. Nine of those items address positive course behaviors—studied with others; participated in class discussions; coped with test anxiety; sought feedback from instructors; evaluated opinions and facts; took notes; and improved writing, reading, and decision-making skills. Seven of those items reflected skills needed for the successful transition to college—adjusting to the college social environment; understanding faculty expectations; dealing with stress, meeting new people; establishing close friendships; increasing commitment to completing the college degree; and succeeding in other courses generally. Finally, five other items related to students’ overall view of their term. Learning community students were more likely to report feeling good about how the term had gone; having a better experience at NEIU than expected; being challenged in their courses; and being likely to recommend NEIU to friends. Both groups reported an equal likelihood to stay at NEIU until graduation.

These reported impacts of learning communities on students are also reflected in fall 2002 student responses. When asked what they liked best about their learning community experience, forty-five out of eighty-six students identified at least one element commonly seen as central to all learning communities: pedagogy—having two or three classes together, getting different perspectives, helping the topics make more sense, having open discussions, getting involved, making classes more

relaxed; social—learning to understand other people better, having better communication with others, feeling closer to other people, bonding with others; and self-reflective—feeling more comfortable with myself, feeling more comfortable with college, and feeling more confident in giving a presentation.

### Faculty assessment of their experience

Faculty in NEIU’s learning community programs generally express high levels of satisfaction with their experiences. In a post-experience survey, they found the assistance they received to develop general course frameworks especially helpful. They were glad that they and their partners had been able to spend time exchanging ideas. But, they wished they had started planning earlier, spending more time previewing proposed class activities, preparing the syllabus, sharing more about their teaching philosophies and styles, and just “getting to know each other better.” They wanted additional help on co-grading joint assignments and coordinating teaching styles. Regarding their teaching experiences, they found especially rewarding their students’ sense of community, the increased comfort level of their students, and the clear feeling of their students that “other people cared.” Several faculty also reported that their enthusiasm for the learning community project led them to attend nearly every one of their teaching partner’s classes even though they had not originally intended to do so.

Learning community faculty had advice for future participating faculty. Learning communities take a lot of time, including a lot of planning time. Picking a partner is *very* important. You have to be ready to adapt as the term goes along. You can’t expect to cover as much material. You have to be able to work out the interpersonal issues with your partner, both in advance and as they arise during the term. With the last requirement, it helps to know your partner both professionally and personally.

### Conclusion

NEIU’s learning community program is meeting our four measures of success. The number of sections, students enrolled in those sections, and students successfully completing their learning community courses

held steady, or increased slightly, over the first few years. Faculty have had largely satisfying experiences; many remain enthusiastic about the program and comprise a growing cadre of positive spokespeople for learning communities at NEIU. Both faculty and student assessment data have been positive in documenting what learning communities add to the instructional menu available to students, and how learning community participation assists students—especially those facing the most daunting challenges—in achieving educational success and satisfaction. Solid financial support for the program continues, and the planned rotation of faculty co-directors is proceeding. The present levels of commitment and success of the program are in a position to be sustained beyond that first period when the learning community pioneers have stepped aside.

In the context of NEIU’s student diversity and its commitment to fostering student success across all elements of that diversity, learning communities—because of their emphasis on community-building, student persistence, and inter-connected learning—are an additional way to support students in their efforts to sustain progress past their first semester and through their later college years. Learning communities at NEIU are an important place where the university’s commitment to “access and excellence” is an attainable goal for all its diverse students, leading to graduation and successful and meaningful lives. ✦

### Notes

1. This article includes information from the NEH grant proposal and final report written by Shelley Bannister and Kate Forhan.
2. See the NEIU Learning Communities website at [www.neiu.edu/casdept/LCs/learning\\_communities.htm](http://www.neiu.edu/casdept/LCs/learning_communities.htm) for additional information including lists of LCs and sample syllabi.
3. NEIU learning community students develop computer skills by using Blackboard in classroom-related activities.

# The South Seattle Community College Faculty Learning Community Project

Sara Baldwin  
South Seattle Community College

Three years ago South Seattle Community College (South Seattle) was granted a five-year Title III grant. The primary focus is to facilitate and support the transition of non-native English-speaking (NNES) students into the college's transfer and professional-technical programs.

Two goals the grant outlined are:

- educating faculty in techniques and strategies that would help their NNES and first generation students succeed in their classes (language acquisition across the curriculum)
- providing seamless transition in and out of the ESL and English developmental courses

South Seattle has the largest number of NNES students in Washington (averaging about 40 percent of the student body). In the past, the issue of how to best serve this population in mainstream classes had not been comprehensively addressed.

Like many institutions we have relied on a front-end-loaded developmental ESL/English model, which supposes that students can/should be taught all the skills they might require before they enter mainstream classes. While this model is generally successful, we observed that not all students succeed, and they may feel that they are kept in developmental courses longer than is necessary. Research supports the idea that NNES students, after they have attained a degree of communicative competency, will learn more efficiently and effectively when they receive additional language support concurrently and within college content classes.

We initiated a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) Project with four main goals:

- educate faculty on language acquisition theory,

alternative developmental models, and best practices

- foster communication on these topics among faculty
- encourage faculty to experiment with new techniques and methods in their classes and discuss the outcomes with their group
- develop an instructional toolkit to support faculty in strengthening students' language acquisition in their disciplines or technical-professional programs

To implement this plan, we developed a long-term plan to engage faculty in scholarly conversations about improving academic language acquisition for NNES and first-generation students. Our goal was to encourage faculty to adopt new practices designed to support the language acquisition of their students within the context of their discipline or field of expertise. We decided that creating FLCs would be an effective strategy for reflecting on and continuing the learning that we would introduce in the large groups. I researched the field of Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) to find stimulating articles for faculty to read before each session.

There was an incentive package of salary credits plus a \$500 stipend to attend team and large group meetings, and to plan and implement a project drawing on NNES research to facilitate students' language acquisition in specific classes. We share information and links to NNES language acquisition research on our faculty learning community blog.<sup>1</sup>

To support the goals we identified in our Title III grant, we established two FLCs—one on seamless transitions and one on language acquisition across the curriculum—and scheduled the faculty meetings back-

to-back. Vice President for Instruction Cheryl Roberts extended personal invitations to ensure that key faculty with critical experience would attend.

We were a bit nervous about attendance since we know how protective faculty members are of their time. Our fears proved to be unfounded; faculty welcomed the opportunity to work collaboratively to discuss and try to solve individual teaching questions. They enthusiastically joined in the series of collaborative activities we planned, reading articles between sessions and returning to engage in often passionate conversations about pedagogy. They often stayed after the workshop, sharing articles and insights. Faculty identified compelling questions they wanted to research further, and split into smaller groups to explore best practices, addressing specific concerns about student learning in the context of their disciplines.

Faculty also identified a topic or question they wanted to explore while focusing on NNES students' language acquisition. This brought faculty together from very different disciplines. The mission of each group was to support members as they designed and carried out a teaching innovation or strategy with one of their classes. Faculty submitted a proposal and after it was approved, they experimented with their teaching innovation in spring quarter. We also continued to have large group reporting out sessions during this time to support the faculty members who were doing projects during spring quarter.

At the end of spring quarter, we had a final plenary session where the faculty shared their projects with the larger group. In general, the scope of the projects was limited, but the faculty learning appeared considerable. In addition, in the summer, we scheduled an afternoon of reflection to review, and edit each others' projects so they could become part of a 'toolkit' which other faculty could use. Variations and extensions of the projects were discussed as well. We are in the process of creating a

toolkit database so these teaching innovations can be stored on the web. They will be available to other faculty and we can add to the database in the next year as we continue this process.

More than twenty-five faculty representing technical, academic, and developmental areas of the college participated in most of the large group sessions, gaining a new perspective about teaching and learning across the college. The nine faculty presented their completed projects at our Great Teachers' Seminar during fall quarter 2005, which focused on language acquisition strategies across the curriculum. This seminar launched the current round of winter 2006 FLCs.

The key to our project has been providing faculty with research-based best practices on language acquisition strategies, as well as alternative approaches to seamless transition across programs. This encourages faculty to develop their own scholarly research to understand how NNES and first generation students in their classes learn. When faculty report on their learning to other faculty at The Great Teachers' Seminar every fall, this initiates another cycle of FLCs, and another year of college-wide learning aimed at supporting the academic success of our NNES and first generation students. ♦

**The key to our project has been providing faculty with research-based best practices on language acquisition strategies, as well as alternative approaches to seamless transition across programs.**

#### Note

1. See <http://flcsscc.blogspot.com>. The resources on South Seattle's blog are accessible to other educators, and include research-based accounts of such critical issues as the difference between acquisition of social English (a year or two) compared to achieving academic proficiency (five to eight years), along with the "top five things" faculty who are not language specialists need to know to be effective teachers with this growing population of students in higher education.

# Students' Experience in Coordinated Studies: What Data on Learning Communities Reveals

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North Seattle Community College

*This article is based on research Jim Harnish did during his tenure as a Carnegie Scholar.*

I began my research project with confidence but naively thinking I would simply process data that I had collected to demonstrate that our team-taught, interdisciplinary coordinated studies curriculum produced significant results.<sup>1</sup> In addition, I wanted to see if I could identify the curriculum and pedagogical design elements that contributed to these outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

The curriculum model we have adopted at North Seattle Community College (NSCC):

- explores a theme or problem rather than discipline methodologies and content
- includes multiple teachers from different disciplines
- provides for larger blocks of class time (3–4 hours) and credits (10–15 credits)
- uses student seminars for exploration of material
- requires a significant amount of writing
- develops an active collaborative teaching and learning environment

I was aware that much work has been done nationally to demonstrate that learning community programs similar to ours have been effective in terms of student success measured by retention, persistence, and graduation rates. NSCC's institutional data from 1997 to 2002 confirmed these findings: 83 percent course completion; 87 percent persistence to next quarter; and, 54 percent AA degree completion. Our studies also indicated:

- Success in skills necessary for other courses were enhanced; for example, when comparing grade performance in English Composition completed within coordinated studies and those taken in stand-

alone courses, the former show a slightly better performance.

- Student/faculty ratios were not out of line with college averages.
- Faculty/cost ratios are only slightly higher than college averages.

But the more interesting and more difficult outcomes to demonstrate were those related to student learning, which were clearly visible in our students and which we “knew” from our eighteen years of experience teaching interdisciplinary studies at North Seattle.

## The Process

I collected more than six hundred end-of-quarter student feedback forms from twenty-three different coordinated studies programs involving twenty-seven different faculty in teams of two or three representing eleven disciplines (art, biology, communication, drama, English, global studies, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and women studies).

These student feedback questionnaires were originally designed to gather student perceptions about their learning experience in order to extract quotable quotes to “prove” that something magical was happening in these programs. Realizing the richness of the “evidence” I had, I began a more formal study including quantitative data from the first three questions: Why did you enroll? If this were not a degree requirement would you have enrolled? Now are you glad you did?

With the help of student assistants and an institutional researcher, I processed the written comments. This resulted in over 5,200 individual statements that were then

sorted and coded into sixty-five categories that I subsequently synthesized into larger categories.<sup>3</sup>

I also administered to about 180 students, in both Coordinated Studies and individual stand-alone courses, the Measure of Intellectual Development, a pre-/post-writing instrument, based on the concepts of William Perry to measure cognitive development. In addition, I led two focus groups with fifteen students from seven coordinated studies programs.

### Student Responses

It was clear from student responses and the data collected that there was a very high overall satisfaction rate along with indications of skill development, intellectual development, a heightened sense of self-confidence, and motivation for learning. The data from the questionnaires indicate: 87 percent glad they enrolled, 8 percent not glad, and 5 percent unsure; 80 percent supported coordinated studies as an AA degree requirement, and 9 percent did not.

When looking at 2,930 individual responses to questions asking for a comparison of coordinated studies curriculum with traditional stand-alone courses: 92 percent indicated a positive learning experience, and 8 percent expressed concerns.

This overall satisfaction rate comes from a cohort of students, 44 percent of whom said they enrolled only because it was a graduation requirement. Another 15 percent indicated they enrolled because it fit conveniently into their weekly schedules. So nearly 60 percent were not enrolled because of the attractiveness of curriculum or pedagogical model but rather because it was convenient or necessary for graduation. Only 30 percent enrolled because of the format or content.

We did not collect demographic data on these respondents, so we do not know what their entering profiles were. In future studies we will.

Some of the common reasons given for not wanting to enroll included the perception that this curriculum did not look like “normal” college classes or it looked like just another hoop to jump through for graduation, or it

had the reputation for being challenging, or larger blocks of classroom time did not seem attractive.

We looked carefully at the “concerns” or negative comments, (8 percent or 238 out of 2,930).

- Fifty-four responses (1.8 percent) related to administrative concerns such as not enough offerings each quarter, or seeing this as a barrier to completing an AA degree, “because the [local] university does not require this.”
- Twenty-nine (1 percent) indicated a preference for stand-alone format or said they did not see how this format was unique.
- Nineteen responses (0.6 percent) indicated a dislike for how they were graded or other individual teacher-specific complaints.
- Eighteen (0.6 percent) had very specific concerns about a particular program like room size, a specific assignment or use of an online component; and another thirty-three (1.1 percent) were very general negative comments like “nothing should be required,” or “I just didn’t like it.”

Eighty-five (2.9 percent) of the “concerns” or negative comments focused on curriculum design elements and their impact on student learning:

- Thirty-five thought that there was not enough depth in specific discipline content for the credits earned.
- Sixteen thought having multiple faculty or an interdisciplinary format led to confusion because they did not know when they were learning history versus literature or how to perform relative to teachers’ expectations from different fields.
- Thirty-four thought the expectations were too high or too much work was assigned for the credits.

In contrast to these negative perceptions, however, were forty-four statements indicating that the challenging workload and coordinated studies format led to the development of skills necessary to achieve a higher level of intellectual and academic development:

*The amount of time required for assignments prepared me for the kind of pace that the university has.*

*I worked hard during this class, but I also got more out of it.*

Seventy-four comments supported the idea that multiple teachers provided a contrast of perspectives that produced more complex insights into the material:

*The exposure to three different instructors and the blending of their teaching skills has enriched my experience in this class, as each added his/her own style and perspective.*

When looking at the concerns, especially those criticizing the format and discipline content, it is clear that many students had expected outcomes associated with traditional, stand-alone, discipline-based curriculum. For instance, they expected to learn “history” or “literature” in neat, clearly-defined lessons rather than exploring a problem or an issue from different discipline perspectives. Some of these expectations are institutionally re-enforced because coordinated studies programs are listed in the schedule as a combination of discrete discipline courses such as Lit 135 (Introduction to Literature), Biology 100, etc. This tends to disguise the primary learning objective of “discovering the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge.”

*Compared to a stand-alone class, I have learned a lot about working with others and how the material fits in with other things. But I did not learn as much on each topic as I would have in a stand-alone class.*

Sometimes students do not immediately realize what learning outcomes they are actually accomplishing:

*I feel like I could have learned more in some regular classes...although English was not a strong element in this class, we did do a lot of reading and understanding of the texts. Also, we learned how to write good essays. (Perhaps we did cover a lot of English after all!) (Sorry, this is confusing. I am an English lover, so I guess “enough is never enough”!) Coordinated Studies is a wonderful and valuable program. I wish it was used in every school, all over the country. I have never learned so much in a class, nor enjoyed myself so completely.*

In addition to this qualitative data, we also administered a pre-/post-writing instrument, the Measure of Intellectual Development, to about ninety students in

four different coordinated studies programs in 2002. This instrument measures the degree of change in the complexity of thinking based on William Perry’s model of cognitive development. We had also used this in 1986 and the results both times showed significant development in students’ thinking abilities from the beginning to end of the quarter.

### Important curriculum design elements

We saw little difference in the distribution of comments across the twenty-three programs studied. Among the design elements that were often identified as important in their learning, students mentioned:

- interdisciplinary exploration of themes
- teachers participating as learners
- collaborative learning, especially seminars
- teaching specific skills
- activities to promote “community”
- longer class periods

### Interdisciplinary exploration of themes

Students seemed to recognize the importance of the primary objective of this curriculum, “discovering the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge,” which includes: investigating broad questions, issues, or themes transcending single disciplines; connecting learning across contexts; developing complex questioning processes; and focusing the process of writing on the discovery of knowledge.

Students seemed to understand that these objectives encouraged them to be an active agent in their learning process, not a passive agent to be taught. They came to see learning as a process of connecting what one already knows or has experienced to some new knowledge and that this is a process unique to each individual. They also became aware that knowledge is not just something an expert has already learned and wants to pass on to others but something actively and socially constructed across the narrow confines of individual disciplines.

Students’ focus of learning moved from being teacher or content-centered to being centered in what happens within and among themselves. Students enthusiastically entered into the process of creating knowledge and

connections rather than being satisfied with just absorbing or remembering someone else's knowledge:

*I was forced to shed some of my pre-conceived notions regarding how I go about studying and learning. It is no longer OK for me to breeze through a book, gleaning the basic concepts and memorizing facts that look likely to be on an exam. Now I have to actually read the work. I have to figure out what the author is trying to tell me and delve deeper by relating those concepts to other works and real life. It is a refreshing challenge.*

*[My program] inspired me to see how related knowledge is. To see not only the facts but how they apply to life and to other disciplines.*

#### Teachers participating as learners

Another essential aspect of our learning community approach is the use of multiple teachers from different disciplines to design curriculum and engage in the actual teaching and learning process. Several teachers in the classroom allows for the presentation of different perspectives and different relationships between students and teachers.

*The exposure to three different instructors and the blending of their teaching skills has enriched my experience in this class, as each added his/her own style and perspective.*

*Seeing teachers disagree taught us that there is more than one honest perspective.*

The learning process is demystified when students see teachers exploring new insights and connections, engaging in spontaneous learning experiences, and modeling how experienced learners work collaboratively.

*Faculty didn't pretend to know everything, but we saw that they were learning. This acknowledges that none of us can or be expected to know everything there is to know about something.*

*Instructors traded off authority with students. Sometimes the teachers seemed like learners. This is different than in a stand alone ("monoculture") because it is dynamic which models real life—"we are all learners."*

#### Collaborative learning, especially seminars

Because there are multiple teachers in the room at the

same time, the role of the teacher as the primary source of learning changes in students' eyes. Students also begin to consider their peers as an important source of their learning. This is especially evident when they talk about the seminar and other collaborative learning activities.

*You can use your peers to learn instead of relying solely on the instructor to provide the facts.*

*It prepared me for college by allowing me to communicate with others and learn from their point of view as well as the professor's point of view.*

The book seminar is one of the collaborative learning activities that re-enforces this idea that there are many sources leading to the discovery of authentic insights. Within the seminar, the relationship of faculty and students is changed from teacher/learner to one of co-learners, which encourages intellectual confidence.

*You come to appreciate insights in the seminar process—different than "being taught."*

*You put your idea out there and others pick up on it and when it comes back you have a new insight – that is an awesome feeling.*

*Being able to see or hear different points of view about the readings has really opened up my thinking. You can talk all you want about how to think but when we get together and see how different people think, it helps me to question and think.*

*Seminar was the chance to discuss ideas openly without being laughed at. It was nice to bring an idea to the group and have everyone take it seriously. It made me realize that not all my ideas are ignorant and uninspired. In the future it will be easier to speak my mind.*

#### Teaching specific skills

The curriculum emphasizes the teaching of academic skills and the development of students' self-awareness as learners. Student responses seem to reflect the importance of this focus:

*I gained a more critical eye for reading materials as opposed to the traditional regurgitation.*

*Seminaring helped me to learn to read "hard" books. I feel liberated that I can read any text.*

*My critical thinking skills improved the most. I analyze everything in my life now. I am not so quick to make judgments.*

*I learned to read a book and not be afraid of writing because we did this so much and so consistently and because we studied the texts in such depth.*

*I know what skills that I need to work on in order to understand materials for myself and for others to understand my understanding of materials. I need to learn to write better.*

In one of the focus groups, students universally reinforced the need to teach specific seminar skills and that it was this “training” along with seeing the faculty team actually engaged in model seminars that helped them develop academic skills related to seminar.

Activities to promote “community”

In addition to teaching seminar skills, the development of other group skills was high on the students’ list of priorities. They talked about the importance of developing a sense of community:

*We learned to build relationships with each other, like a community and in turn ALL were able to contribute ideas, writings, or feelings.*

*The learning community model, especially seminars, created a “safe space” for the older, returning students.*

*This course helped me to stop and listen to others and value their opinions, beliefs, viewpoints and even consider them for myself.*

*It has given me the experience of working with and listening to a group to get a task done.*

Being invested in this sense of community encouraged a sense of responsibility to others and motivated students to higher levels of performance:

*You get to know people in the class better and become more comfortable speaking in groups. You feel like a part of the community.*

*You want to do the work. You feel an obligation to your classmates.*

*It made me want to study in order to have something to say. In a stand-alone course, when you do the*

*assignments or take the test, only the teacher knows what you have done. It is private. But in seminar, you don’t have a choice; your work is public, so you come prepared.*

Longer class sessions

An element of the curriculum design that most students identified as important for their learning was longer class periods—three or four hours, two or three days a week. More time created a sense of community, making room for the development of personal relationships and the opportunity to explore a subject in some depth:

*Being together for nine hours a week and working together in groups helped break down the stiff formal atmosphere of a normal classroom environment.*

*The class times are long enough to delve deeper into subject matter that you couldn’t do in another class.*

### Where do we go from here?

As my Carnegie and Washington Center colleagues are emphasizing, the next step is to move from analysis of student perceptions and institutional data to design research projects that study actual student work in order to document what kind of learning takes place in coordinated studies.

Also, we want to investigate the experience of teachers who participate in these learning communities. What is the impact on their own development as learners, being exposed to new fields of study and different curriculum and pedagogical design elements? How does team (collaborative) teaching impact them?

Finally, what is the longer range impact on students as future learners in higher education and as citizens in a democratic society? ♦

### Notes

1. To examine course syllabi, see <http://northonline.northseattle.edu/integratedstudies>.
2. See “The Role of Emotional and Intellectual Safety” for another study on coordinated studies by my colleague Jane Lister Reis at [http://northonline.sccd.ctc.edu/tlc/PPT/Safety\\_in\\_the\\_classroom\\_master\\_files/frame.htm](http://northonline.sccd.ctc.edu/tlc/PPT/Safety_in_the_classroom_master_files/frame.htm).
3. For a more detailed report, including interviews with students, go to the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning website <http://www.cfkeep.org/html/snapshot.php?id=71144990>.

# Examining Media Literacy in *Ways of Seeing*: Insights from an Analysis of Students' Writing

Carl Waluconis and Gilda Sheppard  
The Evergreen State College—Tacoma



Media literacy is an important student learning outcome. This article describes a process in which we examined students' essays to determine whether and how students demonstrated media literacy outcomes in our two-quarter long program, *Ways of Seeing*.

During the second quarter, we required students to work in groups to create short documentary videos, and then to write a synthesis essay that combined three major elements of the program:

- a weekly film journal on documentaries they viewed outside of class
- a “treatment” for a proposed documentary constructed from *Radio Free Dixie*, a nonfiction book
- aspects of what they learned about “watching” from the work they did on their videos

After the completion of *Ways of Seeing*, we examined the synthesis essays, the main element of our program. To analyze our teaching and their learning, we put on a different set of “evaluation glasses.” We read the essays separately, and then together in a series of “norming” sessions to create a list of outcomes describing media literacy:

- practicing critical thinking when viewing media
- reading representations using semiotic skills
- understanding social constructions in media
- deconstructing power relationships in media
- using processes of seeing “spliced” with processes of writing
- making discoveries (“Aha! moments”)
- understanding self and group process when creating a media production
- developing plans for lifelong learning in media

Having the time to look back on a program and reflect on the work and words of students was a valuable process. Our analysis of students' synthesis essays has helped us refine our definition of media literacy—what it is and what we expect of students. Our study also underscores how production plays a pivotal role in creating community, and documents other unexpected learning outcomes.

We found ourselves developing a different way of thinking about student writing. Though some educators have attempted to tie the visual directly to writing courses, a suspicion of pictures and whether they promote written literacy often smolders in the background. *Ways of Seeing*, because it asked students to create a video and body of writing, brought ideas about the written word and the visual image face-to-face in some new ways for us.

## Outcomes

We read forty-three essays. Because the essay was for juniors and seniors, many took the form of an end-of-program self-evaluation typical of Evergreen programs. The table on the next page summarizes our readings of these essays. So, after all our reading and discussions, what do we know about our teaching and students' learning that we did not know before? Looking quickly at the numbers, we questioned whether the students needed more work learning to analyze social construction in the media and to deconstruct power relationships. Alarmed, we revisited the weekly journal entries students wrote after viewing documentaries, and discovered that each student had indeed demonstrated outcomes that were not showing up in their synthesis essay and we were reminded that certain assignments call on certain outcomes.

Media Literacy Outcomes	# of students describing/ demonstrating	Percentage
Critical thinking	36	84%
Semiotics	32	74%
Understanding social construction	16	37%
Deconstruction of power relationships	15	35%
Writing growth “spliced” with seeing	16	37%
New discoveries	23	53%
Group process/production	35	81%
Lifelong learning	20	47%

Indeed, a large part of the work of engaging students with semiotics is having them shift from passive media watchers to active participants, moving towards autonomy. This is why having a student complete a video is so important. Just as at the onset of literacy only the priests or members of the privileged class were allowed to participate in

### Critical thinking

Critical thinking in the context of media literacy no longer seems like an “additional” outcome. Rather, it shifts into the “fundamentals” column, joining reading, writing, and quantitative skills as a major building block for other media literacy outcomes such as semiotics and perceiving social construction within media.

We were concerned about the seven students who did not demonstrate this ability in their synthesis essay. Because of the Tacoma program structure and the small class sizes, we knew the work of these students well and we knew they had demonstrated critical thinking in other assignments. The absence of critical thinking in their synthesis essay has led us to reconsider the implicit use of critical thinking in nearly all media literacy work.

### Semiotics—visual landscape

Although in the film journals students wrote about the semiotics of the visual landscape, in the synthesis essay they often attached it to a broader perspective or a larger vision they were developing. One student wrote:

*I have learned the meaning behind the way the film is put together. I have learned to look beyond the person and the words they speak.*

Another student described using this ability more actively.

*I feel the critical benefit from studying Media and Production is how I envision everyday events and how I might present them using the perspectives I have been introduced to.*

written literacy, now only the professionals are allowed to speak using a visual language. Students understood that participating actively required necessary skills:

*If the editing of a film is sloppy and unorganized, the audience cannot follow and will quickly lose interest. Some of the techniques used are . . .*

As we learned in this study, when students first wander into the sphere of speaking a visual language, their reactions become intense:

*Employing these tools had a great impact not only in my media reviews, but also in my outlook when driving, looking at wind blowing in trees, people sitting and standing, background, depth and shape. . . . and it is hard for me to not want to carry a DV recorder or just imagine how I might record and capture an event.*

*I find myself dreaming at night, thinking about the angle I want the shot to be.*

This level of reading media and becoming a part of a visual world did not appear in the journals. Of course, some students who were very adept at analyzing visual components such as editorial rhythm and color tones used the synthesis as a longer essay concerning only these elements. Others took the lever of creation in their own hands, such as the student who wrote:

*By shooting empty and partially empty playgrounds, we hoped to convey a message of hope that one day*

*when the maintenance issues are taken care of the children will return to play in these parks again.*

Others talked about their changed perspectives:

*Not only do I now recognize the magic of editing, I also see the reality behind each shot in a film. I know there is a giant camera crew against the fourth wall.*

As we read through the essays, we realized that by “speaking” visually, students gained greater facility in analyzing and understanding the language they had been trained to read but not speak their entire lives.

### Understanding social construction

In reading for this outcome, we decided that recognizing social construction as the content of a film or book was not enough. For instance, when a student wrote “Michael Moore’s agenda in this film was to show how corporate America can take a town and turn it into an economic disaster by putting money first—before the needs of people,” we considered it a summary of someone else’s ideas, and not a demonstration of understanding social construction in media as evidenced by a student’s own analysis of the visual. Students who actively described using this skill often included the specific ways in which they have had their truths constructed for them:

*It is as if we had the capacity to see truth weeded out of our own mental tools.*

Those who wrote about social construction in the media using their new voice showed a deeper understanding:

*The challenge then became how we could create a documentary that included this information but did not perpetuate the negative stereotype. We wanted to ask questions, not provide distinct answers for the viewers.*

*My aim is to create images that slice through the mass suffocating images of confusion and present . . . indicators to the truth where I walk combating consumerism and poverty.*

What it might mean to participate in the making of these social constructions was part of these students’ deeper

understanding of the outcome and often resulted in the development of the next outcome.

### Deconstruction of power relationships

This outcome is among the most controversial in the emerging media literacy community. Most students who wrote about power relationships were generally summarizing information from a documentary film. If they analyzed or interpreted the idea in some detail, they were given credit for the outcome. Some students who more fully grasped the ideas explored the relationships of power in the media in more effective ways:

*The public is also often taught not to question what they are viewing, because someone “greater and far more knowledgeable” produced it.*

A number of students included an analysis of ways in which power in the media plays out in terms of people’s acceptance of particular beliefs and values.

### New processes of writing

As students wrote throughout the quarter, we noticed that many were approaching writing from a new direction. We decided our after-program analysis would be an effective time to explore right-brained and left-brained “approaches to the processes of writing,” and whether either gave students a better understanding of themselves as writers. Students’ journal entries were particularly fresh and detailed, brimming with specific points that worked in effective ways. Then came the treatment of the film about our nonfiction text. We were very acquainted with the writing of most of these students, and we had seen their growth as writers. Some who had struggled all year were now writing scintillating prose. It seemed to us that when students used what has been described as the non-reading or image part of the brain, those who formerly were nearly frozen in place began developing as writers. When we assigned the synthesis essay, we imagined the continuation of this trend in the context of a longer essay. However, as soon as students saw the words “assigned essay,” the lively skills they showed in previous papers evaporated; they did not write as well as when they relied upon the visual.

This work with right- and left-brain writing certainly needs more investigation. Students who recognized the shift between writing based on images and writing based on text often saw the split between visual and written as competitive.

*Even if it is the case that a film starts with a written story, by God, it is ten times more gratifying for most of western society to watch that story unfold visually, than to imagine the theme over a two week period of reading a novel.*

*Who holds the real power, the painter of cave walls or the man holding the Ten Commandments carved into tablets of stone?*

Those who grasped the lever of control in this controversy seemed to reach a deeper understanding. A student closed her discussion of deconstructing images by writing:

*Now that the magic has been sucked out of the movie making process, I feel much more confident in my ability to write well-thought out story lines...because I have the ability to think past the pen.*

The nature of writing that students explored here has not been widely discussed in terms of teaching writing in a college class. Just the same, as with most of our analyses, the recurrent theme is that when students are “doing,” they understand more deeply and effectively. On the other hand, there were times when students had a truth for which they could not find a visual. Those exploring drug use among the homeless set out to prove that it did not exist. They found complications they could explore in writing, but not in a short visual.

### New discoveries

“Aha moments” may occur in seminar discussions, during a presentation, or even in an evaluation conference, but our focus is on those that occurred in writing the synthesis essay. They reflect a wide variety of discoveries, including areas beyond the scope of traditional media literacy. In the Evergreen tradition of self-evaluations, many emphasized revelations concerning the group process of creating the video. One student wrote in detail

about her struggling group:

*Everyone thought they were in the right place using what talent they thought they possessed. Well let's just say quietly that this was the furthest from the truth. We had a self-appointed director who thought he had the discipline to direct. We had an editor that thought she was best at erasing and fixing; we had a woman who didn't have the confidence to do anything, and then there was [student writing this] left, who's a burnt out senior this quarter too unmotivated to do any real work.*

Though many group projects have their rough spots and stories of interpersonal conflict, it is our experience that video creations cause more of these. It seems that students invest more ego in these creations than in others, perhaps because they are at last speaking in a visual language which they have spent plenty of time “reading” but have had hardly any previous opportunities to speak. The frequent theme about the excitement of showing a product is reflected in this student's statement:

*As I watched the film along with my classmates, I realized that this film had taken on a life of its own.*

The work at speaking in this visual language, new but at the same time not new to most of them, is reflected in one student's description of her group as being “much like babes in the woods, but with the assistance of others we became more aware of what it takes to create a concept and how the simplest objects can become the cornerstone of a film.” The description here is certainly about group process, but carried to the level of engaging with a community in new and different ways.

At other times, the new discovery seemed to occur along with other outcomes. Social issues, personal issues, and ideas about creating all seemed to meet in important moments for the students. For instance, one group set out “to show some of the disparities that exist in Tacoma between some of the nicer neighborhoods compared to those with less money.” Driving around with a camera, however, their group discovered:

*Try as we might, we could not find that “shocking image” of poverty that we needed. . . . It somewhat shames me to admit it, but we were so caught up in*

*the shot sequence of our film that I had begun to drive down alley ways and film people's back yards with broken down cars and garbage. Suddenly I stopped the car and we both looked at each other and said, "What the hell are we doing?" All at once we both realized that we were not "documenting" anything, rather we were making a fictional film about something that did not exist. Make no mistake that economic disparities are present in Tacoma and do affect the lives of her citizens; they are just not quite as simple as we were trying to make them out to be. Just because someone lacks health care or employment does not mean that they do not take care of their lawn. We talked about it and decided that because we were using only images and music we would not be able to portray the complexity of this issue that a film with interviews and narration might be able to do. Not that it couldn't be done, but because of time, skill, or technology we decided not to attempt it.*

This student struggled with writing throughout the year, especially developing ideas. What changed his skill level? He claimed in the same essay that, "our whole body is part of how we process images." He wanted to use more than one part of his brain to write and finally he found the vehicle for attempting it.

In our experience, media literacy pushes students to look not only at the text—the image, sound, light, camera angle, etc., of a shot or a scene—but also to examine the sub-text, the social policies that inform the image which may be obfuscated by the text. In turn, this gives the student a sense of autonomy when watching media. Because this course focused on documentary films, students often consciously shifted between views of the world based in fiction and those based in nonfiction.

### Group process/production

The emergence of this outcome in synthesis assignments indicates how important media literacy is. In many ways it is difficult to imagine how a student could write about this outcome without connecting with their relationship with society and ways in which they connect or do not connect with others. Comments on group process are often included in how students define community.

This group process outcome, which we did not ask for but that appeared frequently in students' essays,

indicates how important creating an actual piece in teams is to learning. The urgency to study group process further and include it in our curriculum could hardly be greater.

### Lifelong learning

Unprompted, many students chose to include in their essay the importance of continuing the work from the quarter. This occurred in three different ways. Some students felt they had only scratched the surface in what was for them a brand new area and wrote about the importance for themselves of knowing more. Others described what they gained in complex detail and wrote about the importance of spreading the word to others, even though they realized they had more to learn. Some students wanted to continue creating films or videos, including those who had not participated in this kind of creation before. Nevertheless, they all expressed the need to continue to communicate in visual language in order to maintain their literacy.

### Conclusion

As a learning outcome, media literacy has proven to house many surprises for us. We asked students to take seriously something they have often either taken for granted or considered a nuisance. They discover readily that learning to read and interpret visual language seems to be a necessity in a society where that language is widely used to sell commodities or ideas. Imagine, however, if someone told you that you were going to learn a language, but you would never be able to fully speak or write it. This is the challenge faced by media literacy programs. Our program analysis indicates that a deeper and more effective understanding of media comes when one takes a hand in production singularly and collaboratively. The connections with community become more vital.

The importance of media literacy is no longer that it has a cause-and-effect relationship with society. Nor is it only the relationship between consumer and producer. With media a part of our consciousness, our study also indicates that there are new ways to approach writing in a society becoming more visual. ✦



## Learning Communities

### National Learning Commons



In 1996, the Washington Center broadened learning community work beyond the Washington State network in response to requests from campuses across the country.

Grants from the Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (1996-99) and The Pew Charitable Trusts (2000-04) seeded the development of national learning community work which includes:

- a residential **summer institute** for campus teams
- a national **directory** of campus programs
- a bank of **resources** on implementation and assessment
- a **monograph series** on implementation and assessment
- a guide to regional networks and their activities



#### National Learning Communities Directory

This online database includes public and private institutions, from urban colleges to research universities. Entries highlight initiatives designed for diverse students in all areas of study.



#### 'What are learning communities?' and other Frequently Asked Questions

This primer on the what, why and how of learning communities includes brief answers to frequently asked questions, online resources, institutional examples, and recommendations for further reading.



#### Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities

This book explores how students in learning communities actively participate in their own education, and deepen and diversify their college experience.

Laufgraben, J. L. and Shapiro N. S. 2004. *Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities*. Jossey-Bass.

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(360) 867-5611

<http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=73>

*"Learning communities are no longer an outlier concept, on the fringe; it's a regular topic, having reached a level of recognition similar to other key movements such as service learning, classroom research, and cooperative learning."*

Marie Hesse, President, Chandler Gilbert Community College

### National Learning Commons

#### Resources

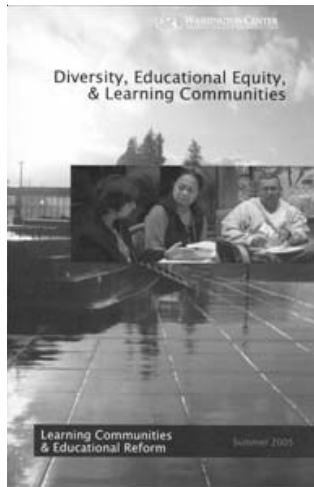
#### Events

May 5 - 6, 2006  
**Consortium for Illinois Learning Communities Curriculum Planning Retreat**  
at Starved Rock State Park,  
Utica, IL

Oct 26 - 27, 2006  
**Learning Communities**  
at Passionist Spiritual Center  
of Riverdale, Bronx, NY

#### Add an event

# Washington Center Publications



**Emily Lardner**

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## *Diversity, Educational Equity, and Learning Communities*

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This new monograph, the first in a Washington Center series focused on learning communities and educational reform, challenge educators to draw upon decades of diversity work in order to develop learning communities that contribute in genuine ways to educational equity. The lead essay outlines a framework that synthesizes research on diversity with the characteristics of effective learning community programs. The five chapters that follow provide rich case stories based on campus experiences, illustrating the range of choices institutions make when they deliberately use learning community strategies as a means to achieving educational equity.

*Authors: Emily Lardner with Heather Keast, Barbara Williamson, Carol Hamilton, Jane Lister Reis, Phyllis van Slyck, Debora Barrera Pontillo, Catherine Crain, Charles Ryan Brown, Grace Dillon, Celine Fitzmaurice, Greg Jacob, Yves Labissiere, Antonia Levi, Cherry Muhanji, Candyce Reynolds, and Jack Straton*

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Paperback: 106 pages 2005 ISBN 1-56377-101-2 \$18.00

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## **NATIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES PROJECT MONOGRAPH SERIES COMPLETE SET \$95**

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### **Learning Communities in Community College \$10**

includes an extended analysis of how learning communities meet the multiple purposes and pressures of community colleges, and brief profiles of eighteen programs that fit various college goals (e.g., general education, basic skills, and community partnerships). Tips on getting started, a selective list of print resources, and names and email address offer additional information specifically for learning communities in community colleges.

*Authors: Julia Fogarty and Lynn Dunlap with Edmund Dolan, Maria Hesse, Marybeth Mason, and Jacque Mott*

### **Learning Communities in Liberal Arts Colleges \$10**

begins with a history of learning communities' roots in liberal arts education. Four case studies examine different goals for learning communities (e.g., recruitment and retention, curriculum development), and snapshots of four other distinctive programs show the range of models for liberal arts colleges. A list of websites and publications and names of contacts are additional resources.

*Authors: Karen Spear with J. David Arnold, Grant H. Cornwell, Eve Walsh Stoddard, Richard Guarasci, and Roberta S. Matthews*

### **Integrating Learning Communities with Service-Learning \$12**

introduces the common features of service-learning and learning communities and how each movement can enhance the other. Eight case studies follow, focusing on different kinds of service-learning integration in various kinds of institutions, plus a chapter on getting started. Additional resources include publications and websites on service-learning, learning communities, community-based research, and reflective practice.

*Authors: Jean MacGregor with Marie Eaton, Richard Guarasci, Maria Hesse, Gary Hodge, Ted Lewis, Marybeth Mason, Judith Patton, Lin Nelson, John O'Connor, Penny Pasque, and David Schoem*

### **Learning Communities in Research Universities \$10**

includes an extended introduction surveying the history, appeal, and current issues of learning communities in research universities. Five case studies of different learning community models and brief descriptions of programs at sixteen other universities provide practical, specific examples of implementation. Websites, a publications list, and names of contacts are additional resources for information about learning communities in research universities.

*Authors: John O'Connor with James A. Anderson, Jodi Levine Laufgraben, Karen Oates, David Schoem, Nancy S. Shapiro, and Barbara Leigh Smith*

### **The Pedagogy of Possibilities: Developmental Education, College-Level Studies, and Learning Communities \$15**

invites developmental educators and learning community practitioners to create challenging and supportive learning environments for academically underprepared students. Research-based best practices in developmental education provide a rationale for adopting an approach to learning communities for developmental students that intentionally targets high-risk curriculum. Nine case studies and numerous examples illustrate this approach. Websites and additional resources for developmental education and learning communities are also included.

*Authors: Gillies Malnarich with Ben Sloan, Phyllis van Slyck, Pam Dusenberry, and Jan Swinton*

### **Learning Community Research and Assessment: What We Know Now \$15**

addresses the question "Do learning communities really work?" by reviewing previous assessment studies, highlighting some single institution studies and some notable research studies. It suggests areas for further research and assessment. Appendices include annotated bibliographies, a matrix of research studies, and some commercially available assessment instruments.

*Authors: Kathe Taylor with William Moore, Jean MacGregor, and Jerri Lindblad*

### **Doing Learning Community Assessment: Five Campus Stories \$12**

focuses on five colleges and universities (Temple, Iowa State, South Florida, Skagit Community College, Portland State) and their assessment programs, which offer examples of varying goals, methods, and outcomes.

*Authors: Jean MacGregor with Michelle D. Cook, Lynn Dunlap, Shari Ellertson, Doug Epperson, Teresa L. Flateby,*

*Mary E. Huba, Phil Jenks, Yves Labissiere, Jodi Levine Laufgraben, William S. Moore, Judy Patton, and Les Stanwood*

### **Learning Communities and the Academic Library \$12**

provides a history and analysis of the learning community movement in higher education and examples of academic librarians' involvement in learning communities ranging from structured, credit courses to more informal arrangements within courses. It considers the place of information literacy and interdisciplinary general education by briefly describing and categorizing fourteen learning community programs. Additional information includes the Association of College and Research Libraries' Information Literacy Competency Standards and a selective list of references.

*Author: Sarah Pederson*

### **Learning Communities and Fiscal Reality: Optimizing Learning in a Time of Restricted Resources \$10**

reviews the critical issues facing learning communities in a time of limited resources. Different approaches to designing learning communities are discussed in terms of their educational and fiscal implications. Considerations in designing sustainable learning community programs are described.

*Authors: Al Guskin, Mary Marcy, and Barbara Leigh Smith*

To order individual publications or the set, please contact:

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# Washington Center **Events**

## **Leading Edges for Learning Community Work: Learning Community Coordinators' Retreat** **March 23–24, 2006**

### **SeaTac Marriott Hotel, Seattle, WA**

How do we rigorously assess the learning that interdisciplinary learning communities make possible for students? And how do we link assessment of students' learning with ongoing reflections on effective practice? Those two questions are at the core of this retreat. While ample data about retention and persistence are being collected, too little work has been done on the nature and the quality of learning within the context of learning communities. Veronica Boix-Mansilla, a leading researcher on assessing interdisciplinary learning and a member of the Project Zero team at Harvard University, will join us to introduce a collaborative process for assessing student learning.

The process is one that can be adapted and used by learning community programs everywhere. The model comes from work done by Project Zero researchers and the teachers, administrators, and students involved in *The Evidence Process*. This project's purpose was to develop a sustainable method in which teachers would create inquiry groups based on their own real questions, work collaboratively using structured protocols to examine students' learning, document their findings, and develop more effective practices. We will be drawing upon the protocols outlined in *The Evidence Process*, including one intended to help participants clarify their questions about students' learning, and one designed to help groups of teachers examine student work together. We invite retreat participants to identify questions about students' learning that have emerged in the context of learning communities, and to bring those questions, along with examples of students' work, to the retreat.

With this retreat, we hope to launch a cohort of learning community faculty who are engaged in their own versions of *The Evidence Process*. We also hope to develop several online "evidence" groups whose members come from different learning community programs. These campus-based and online evidence groups will add a rich dimension to current work on the scholarship of learning and teaching, and help address critical questions about the nature of student learning in the context of interdisciplinary learning.

Time is also set aside at the retreat for learning community coordinators to exchange questions, brainstorm solutions to common problems, and share program updates.

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## **Curriculum Planning Retreats** **April 27–28 and May 11–12, 2006**

### **Rainbow Lodge, North Bend, WA**

The Washington Center Curriculum Planning Retreats are designed for faculty teams who anticipate working together in a learning community of one sort or another—from coordinated studies programs, to clustered courses, to linked or paired classes. The retreats are structured so that teams can choose to participate in workshops or plan on their own, with visits from experienced learning community practitioners. The grounding for all the workshops at the retreat is a commitment to create curriculum that engages students and faculty, leading to learning that lasts. Some teams may elect to use the retreat to sequester themselves for an extended planning session, with or without the assistance of a resource person from another school. Based on previous experience, those teams will find the setting restful and meal-time conversations with colleagues at other institutions stimulating.

**Spreadsheets Across the Curriculum 2006:  
Designing Modules to Address Key Quantitative Concepts  
July 23–24, 2006**

**Phoenix Inn, Olympia, WA**

This project's goal is to create Excel spreadsheet modules that will help students develop clearer conceptions of critical quantitative concepts in courses across the curriculum. These modules are designed specifically to present problems within problems: the initial problem is context-specific, but in order to solve that problem, students have to build spreadsheets that will perform the necessary calculations.

Modules developed last year include "Creating a Household Budget," for a high-intermediate English as a Second Language class, "Major League Baseball Salaries," for an Advanced Placement high school statistics class, "Archimedes and Pi," for a mathematics for elementary teachers class, and "Energy Flow Through Agroecosystems" for an interdisciplinary coordinated studies program entitled "Ecological Agriculture."

At the institute in 2006, participants can review the modules that were piloted during the 2005–2006 academic year in addition to those developed earlier. Participants are welcome to revise existing modules and adapt them for groups of students in different courses, as well as develop new modules.

This National Science Foundation grant-funded project (0442629) is aimed at producing a library of finished modules to be published on the web. The grant funds cover participants' room and board costs, along with materials, during the institute. Stipends are also provided when modules are submitted to the editorial team headed by Len Vacher, at the University of South Florida. See [www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=75](http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=75) for applications and more information.

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**College Readiness Workshop: Designing Quality Dev Ed Curriculum  
October 26–27, 2006**

**Rainbow Lodge, North Bend, WA**

How can we provide learning experiences that prepare students to do college-level work in the programs and courses they intend to take? This curriculum planning retreat is an opportunity for instructors who teach developmental classes and their colleagues who teach college-level courses to design integrative assignments and curricula that will help students prepare for college.

This extended workshop, co-sponsored by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges and the Washington Center, begins Thursday morning at 9:00 am and ends Friday at noon.

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**Math Consortium Fall Retreat  
November 16–17, 2006**

**Rainbow Lodge, North Bend, WA**

Among the most popular features of this conference are the "breakaway" sessions. Conference attendees identify topics they would like to discuss with their colleagues and then meet together with other interested participants to share innovative ideas and brainstorm problem solutions. The dialogue is rich and rewarding and usually leads to post-conference communication.

**Check [www.evergreen.edu/washcenter](http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter) for event details and registration forms.**

# 9<sup>th</sup> Annual National Summer Institute on Learning Communities

June 26–July 1, 2007  
The Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA

## **Application deadline: November 17, 2006**

Helping campuses start or strengthen learning community programs to enhance student learning is the primary aim of this institute. Teams leave with a campus plan in hand, specifically designed for what will work best in their circumstances. Experienced institute resource faculty, drawn from across the country to meet the needs of campus teams, work to support your planning efforts. Colleges and universities selected for this institute also have the option of a follow-up site visit by a team of consultants who offer in-person expertise while your campus team is implementing its plan.

Designed to honor and use the practical wisdom of learning community practitioners throughout the country as well as the growing educational research on what makes learning community programs effective, the institute offers teams a mix of plenaries, focused workshops designed around practical problems, and ample team time with support from resource faculty. Through dialogue, reflection, consultation, and dedicated planning time, each team is supported while it creates an action plan for learning community development on its campus.

The institute admits between 15 to 20 teams each year. Any two- or four-year college or university may apply. Because we are committed to helping institutions successfully start and strengthen their learning community programs, teams may be at any stage in learning community development. Each application will be reviewed for team composition and clarity of project focus. Teams should include a lead academic administrator, a student-affairs professional, and an individual who will be responsible for assessment. The rest of the team should be built based on the team's goals: likely candidates include faculty members, librarians, counselors, students, and directors of teaching/learning centers.

# ABOUT THE WASHINGTON CENTER FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

**“By working together across traditional boundaries of educational politics we can maximize the benefits of sharing and adapting the best ideas from each arena.”**

— Booth Gardner, Governor, State of Washington  
(excerpt from 1987 letter to Washington Center)

We are for the academic success of *all* students. Increasing access to significant learning experiences for students, especially those under-represented in higher education is our primary goal. The measure of our success over time will be improvements not only in retention rates, but also academic achievement and graduation rates.

We work at the state, regional, and national levels with faculty members, staff, and administrators to share good practices and carry out collaborative projects aimed at improving undergraduate teaching and student learning. Through workshops, institutes, campus visits, publications, and a website, the Washington Center promotes projects aimed at enhancing the learning of all students. More than 6,500 people receive our newsletters, we regularly act as consultants, and we connect people, projects, and resources.

## Our work

We focus our work in four major areas: *curricular initiatives*, including developmental education, quantitative literacy, and curriculum for the bioregion; *equity and diversity*, including the organizing of an annual retreat for campus teams; *faculty enrichment*, including the scholarship of teaching and learning; and *learning communities*, including the national summer institutes and national learning community directory and resources.

## Our assumptions

Three major assumptions inform our practice: (1) collaboration is key both within and across institutions, (2) effective educational practices need to be recognized and built upon, and (3) systemic long-term change results from small-scale, locally determined changes in practice that are carefully documented and nurtured.

## Regular funding

In the 1987–89 biennium budget allocation, the Washington State Legislature established Washington Center as a public service center of The Evergreen State College, with a mandate to work with two- and four-year higher education institutions and other educators throughout the state to improve the quality of undergraduate education.

## Consortium members and staff

Washington Center is organized as a statewide consortium with a national reach. Our member institutions include thirty-three community and technical colleges, six public four-year institutions, one tribal college, and eleven independent colleges in Washington State. Our core staff includes two co-directors and two support staff.

## Collaboration

In addition to organizing initiatives, the Center collaborates in other state, regional, national, and international educational reform initiatives. We regularly seek grants for special projects. The National Council on Education in the Disciplines, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, the National Science Foundation, the Mathematical Association of America, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, and The Russell Family Foundation have supported Washington Center’s work.