

Recent Research on Freshman Learning Communities

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To supplement a comprehensive review of the Freshman Learning Community program at IU Kokomo, the Interim Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Steven T. Sarratore requested a report of recent research on learning community models and their relative effectiveness. The literature has long shown that learning communities in general increase student retention and engagement, and we have already received a report of the impact of our FLC program on GPA and retention. So these issues are not addressed in this report. The focus here is on describing current learning community models, their strengths and weaknesses, and what aspects of learning community programs appear to be most important for increasing student success.

Learning Community Models

Recent literature describes four basic models of learning communities, though there are many variations of these. These are: 1) paired or linked courses, 2) cohorts in large courses, 3) coordinated studies or team-taught programs, and 4) residence-based programs (Guskin, Marcy, & Smith, 2004; Oertel, 2001; Price, 2005). As IU Kokomo does not have residence halls, they will not be discussed in this review.

In the **paired or linked course** model, a cohort of students are scheduled for two or more courses that they take together. Usually the cohort is small—no more than 30 students. Each course has its own instructor. The degree of coordination between instructors can vary. Some faculty simply select some common themes and topics and coordinate due dates for the two courses; other faculty may collaborate extensively, creating integrative assignments and projects. A few institutions have extended this model to three or more “clustered” courses, often including a 1 credit hour orientation course (Oertel, 2001; Price 2005). This model is most cost-effective when the enrollment levels in the linked courses are not lowered (Guskin, et al., 2004).

The **cohorts-in-large-classes** model is more common in universities with large introductory courses. In this model, students are co-enrolled in a large introductory course and a smaller course, such as freshman composition, and/or a smaller study section, which is sometimes led by a peer-leader. The degree of coordination between the instructors of the large introductory course and the smaller sections is minimal (Price, 2005). Guskin, et al. (2004) note that this is a highly cost-effective approach, especially for large universities, but it provides less integration than do the other models.

The **team-taught model** is the model currently used at IU Kokomo. In this model, faculty members work together to create two or more courses, often using an interdisciplinary theme. In some institutions, freshmen may have their entire first semester dedicated to this curriculum (i.e., they take no courses outside the learning community). Oertel (2001) found that non-residential campuses which used this model had a cohort of about 30 students. However, Price (2005) and MacGregor et al. (2002) reported that the cohort is usually much larger (up to 75 students, or 20 - 25 students per faculty member). Faculty and students often divided into smaller groups for more active learning opportunities such as discussions, service-learning, and attending special events. Learning communities with three

faculty members on the team generally encompass three courses (9 credit hours). Examples include the Quanta Program (Daytona State College) and the Aquinas Program (St. Thomas University). Oertel (2001) found the team-taught model to be the most expensive model, but Guskin, et al. (2004) suggest team-taught programs can be comparable to stand-alone programs by attending carefully to student-faculty ratios. However, they also note that learning community models, such as the team-taught model, which are the most integrated are also more likely to “challenge the existing values and decision-making processes and require greater investment in faculty development and faculty planning time” (p. 18).

Many institutions have multiple learning community models available to students. Even so, most institutions serve only “a very small fraction of students on any given campus” (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008a). A few institutions require participation in a learning community for certain students (e.g., those needing developmental writing or developmental mathematics) and others (e.g., Cal State East Bay) require learning community participation for all first-year students (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007). Some researchers (e.g., Guskin, et al., 2004; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008a) suggest that institutions look for ways to make their learning communities available to more of their students.

Essential Characteristics of Learning Communities

Various authors (e.g., MacGregor, et al., 2002; Price, 2005; Oertel, 2001; Engstrom & Tinto, 2007) have listed the “essential” characteristics of effective learning communities based on literature reviews and surveys of learning community experts. These include:

- organizing students and faculty into **smaller groups**
- an **integrated curriculum**
- **active and collaborative learning**
- helping students establish academic and social **support networks**
- helping students **adapt to expectations** of college
- high level of **faculty collaboration** and participation
- focusing on **learning outcomes** and assessing those outcomes
- delivering **academic support services**
- **good fit** with the institution’s mission and culture
- ongoing assessment of **program outcomes**.

Oertel (2001) advises that, for learning community programs to be effective, faculty must be involved and committed on a continuing basis. This requires not only additional **faculty development**, but also a **faculty reward system** that recognizes the importance of their work. Lardner and Malnarich (2008c) suggest that for learning communities to become sustainable, the program must “frankly [assess] competing demands on faculty time” (p.22) and **refocus on the kinds of learning** they want the LC program to achieve.

Nearly every author asserts that **integrative learning** is an essential feature of freshman learning communities. Learning communities which are organized around a theme permit students make connections between the skills and content of the linked courses. This cross-subject integration promotes deeper learning (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007). Lardner and Malnarich (2008a, 2008b) of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College assert that integrative learning is a central outcome for students in any learning community. They

argue, however, that integrative learning is not *necessarily* interdisciplinary. Rather, interdisciplinary learning is a specific subset of integrative learning. They describe integrative learning as a “habit of mind” which requires *solid grounding in a discipline*. Students must have a firm grasp of a knowledge base (the “big ideas”) within a discipline, understand the methods used by that discipline, the discipline’s purposes (why do they do what they do?), and how experts in that discipline communicate their knowledge. Once they have this disciplinary grounding, students are asked to integrate this information with real life problems or issues. (Their article and presentation give excellent ideas for how to develop and assess integrative assignments and would be the basis for a good faculty development workshop for learning community faculty.)

Effectiveness of Learning Communities

Many studies have looked at learning community effectiveness in terms of student retention, student satisfaction, and student success (e.g., Scrivener, et al., 2008; see also Taylor, et al. 2003, for a comprehensive review). However, there are, at present, only a few studies as to *which aspects* of learning communities are *most important* in terms of promoting student learning and student success. Their findings are reviewed here.

The **National Survey of Student Engagement Annual Report for 2007** describes results from some experimental NSSE items designed to obtain more information about learning communities. They found that certain aspects of learning communities were more strongly related to self-reported gains in general education skills, understanding self and others, and “vocational skills” (such as working with others, solving real-world problems, and leadership skills). Learning communities which included **explicit opportunities for integrating learning across the LC courses** (through discussion groups or course assignments) had the strongest positive effects on student engagement and self-reported outcomes. **Required out-of-class activities** also had a strong positive impact. A weak positive impact was found for including undergraduate peer advisors in the LC. Interestingly, when the courses were reserved **ONLY** for program participants, and/or when a majority of the students’ courses were taken as part of the LC, then LC participation either had no impact or had a negative impact on student engagement and self-reported gains in student learning.

Engstrom and Tinto’s (2007) study of learning communities in 19 institutions (including 6 four-year institutions) found that LC’s lead to “higher academic and social engagement, greater rates of course completion, and higher rates of persistence” (p. 3). The authors report that several factors were particularly important to these outcomes (as revealed through focus groups with students at five of the institutions studied). These are: teaching strategies that focused on **active and collaborative learning**, **high expectations** coupled with a **supportive environment** and faculty belief that students could be successful, and **integrative assignments** that promoted deeper learning. In addition, **peers** were important sources of support and knowledge, particularly when the instructors had designed assignments, such as group work, to enhance peer relationships. Interestingly, though, student connection to peers in the LC did not enhance their connection to peers outside of the LC.

Two important national projects are underway. The aforementioned Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education is undertaking a national (20 campus) project on assessing **learning outcomes** in learning communities. They are developing protocols for assessing student work, especially in integrative learning. A special issue (December 2008) of *Journal of Learning*

Communities Research will be devoted to this work. The other project is sponsored by the National Center for Postsecondary Research (www.postsecondaryresearch.org). This longitudinal study of 6 community colleges will use random assignment of students to LC or non-LC courses, then follow up for several years to determine LC effects on student achievement, persistence in higher education, and most effective LC models. They expect to publish preliminary findings sometime in 2009 (Visher, et al., 2008).

Conclusions

While various learning community models exist, there is no one model that is considered “best.” Researchers agree that determining the optimal model for any institution must take into account institutional culture, issues of cost, and sustainability. Guskin, et al (2004) in particular specify that the concept of “goodness of fit” is most important: The best learning community program for any institution is the one that meets the institution’s goals with the least cost.

The evidence so far indicates that the organizational model is less important than the kinds of learning taking place. Learning communities are designed to promote integrative learning and provide ample opportunities for active and collaborative learning in a challenging and supportive environment. The empirical evidence we have suggests that, in particular, developing assignments that give students explicit opportunities for integrating material across learning community courses (or integrating course content with real-life experience) is particularly important. Indeed, Lardner and Malnarich (2008b) believe that this is the single most important aspect of learning communities, and they argue that re-focusing faculty on this task will re-energize experienced learning community faculty. Researchers recommend that, for learning community programs to be sustainable over time, the faculty who teach in learning communities must be committed to and enthusiastic about the goals of the program. Continuing faculty development is crucial, as is a faculty reward system that demonstrates the value that the institution places on this work. In addition, for learning community programs to be effective and sustainable into the future, faculty and administration must be committed to engaging in ongoing, systematic assessment of student learning and program effectiveness, and using the information gained to improve student learning and program outcomes.

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