

## **Proposal: Thematic Learning Communities for First Year Experience**

The Retention Task Force's Learning Communities Working Group forwards the following recommendation to create a Freshman Experience Program organized around Thematic Learning Communities to the SNU Cabinet for its consideration.

### **Background**

SNU has been engaged in creating variations on the learning community theme for over twenty years in a various curricular and co-curricular areas. SNU's NSI program, started in about 1984 by the Office of Student Development under the leadership of Linda Gresham and Mike Brooks, set out to organize incoming students into family groups that provided social support through the first semester and through informal contacts afterwards. This grew over time to include a curricular component that came to be called Orienting to College, which sought to introduce students to services and the expectations of college academic culture. At this same time, SNU founded the School of Adult Studies and adopted a cohort enrollment model for adult students in degree completion programs providing lockstep academic programs and cohort based delivery of student services. Since that time other programs that utilize variations of the learning community model have emerged including the Ministry Intern Program, which creates a learning community organized around active participation in ministry opportunities, and the Honors Program, which provides an opportunity for high achieving students to opt into an integrated learning community. In light of these existing programs, SNU was an early and ongoing adopter of the learning community model.

These programs have been successful to varying degrees for over 20 years. Degree completion programs using the adult cohort model have become one of SNU's signature programs with strong recruitment and high rates of retention. The Freshman NSI program, particularly with its Welcome Week experience (though whittled down now to only 3.5 days), has successfully introduced students to campus life. The work of introducing freshman students to academic culture to OTC struggled from the outset.

A set of student focus groups run in Fall 2007 revealed several problems associated with OTC. Chief among them was a lack of integration between the curricular content of OTC, uneven expectations across sections taught by various faculty members, failure of overall first year curriculum to reinforce the skills presented in OTC and thus, the course seemed irrelevant. Discussions with faculty revealed a lack of buy-in driven by the sense that OTC was an add-on that distracted from teaching classes, which counted as

more substantial contributions to load. This confirmed an observation made by Linda Gresham based on her work with the National Resource Center for First Year Experience and Students in Transition that the one credit, one semester academic seminar was the “toilet class.”

In response to these observations, plans were made in 2008 to re-engineer the first year experience around practices found to be more successful by other universities round the country. In the first iteration of a freshman learning community, the General Education Council, General Education Frontline Faculty, the Office of the Registrar, the NSI Director and SNU Department Chairs designed a one semester cohort experience that organized students in a cluster of majors into linked general education courses. A quick survey of students at the end of the first semester, designed to assess basic student satisfaction as well as predicted outcomes of more robust learning community models revealed that more than 90% of students perceived the experience to be positive and nearly half claimed that it made their first semester a great experience. These positive responses juxtaposed with the very negative feedback on OTC drawn from the previous years focus groups suggested that further planning to develop a high quality, highly integrated learning community experience could yield positive results.

With previous experience with successful learning communities (seen implementation of “best practices”) at Seattle Pacific, Santa Clara, Pepperdine, Azusa Pacific, Scott Strawn and Michael Houston, new to SNU in 2008, brought enthusiasm for a robust learning community model that teamed student, spiritual and academic development staff and faculty with students to introduce and incorporate incoming students into SNU’s Christ-centered community of scholars. Further research into learning communities revealed that integrated learning communities are found utilize to organize and engage students in interdisciplinary learning at school ranging from large public universities to private liberal arts colleges. Where implemented successfully, learning communities contribute to the creation of signature first year experiences, high rates of retention, increases in academic time on task and thus student learning, increased interaction between faculty, staff, an students focused on learning and living and living in community, and good student socialization.

## **The Next Step for SNU Learning Communities**

### **Guiding Principles**

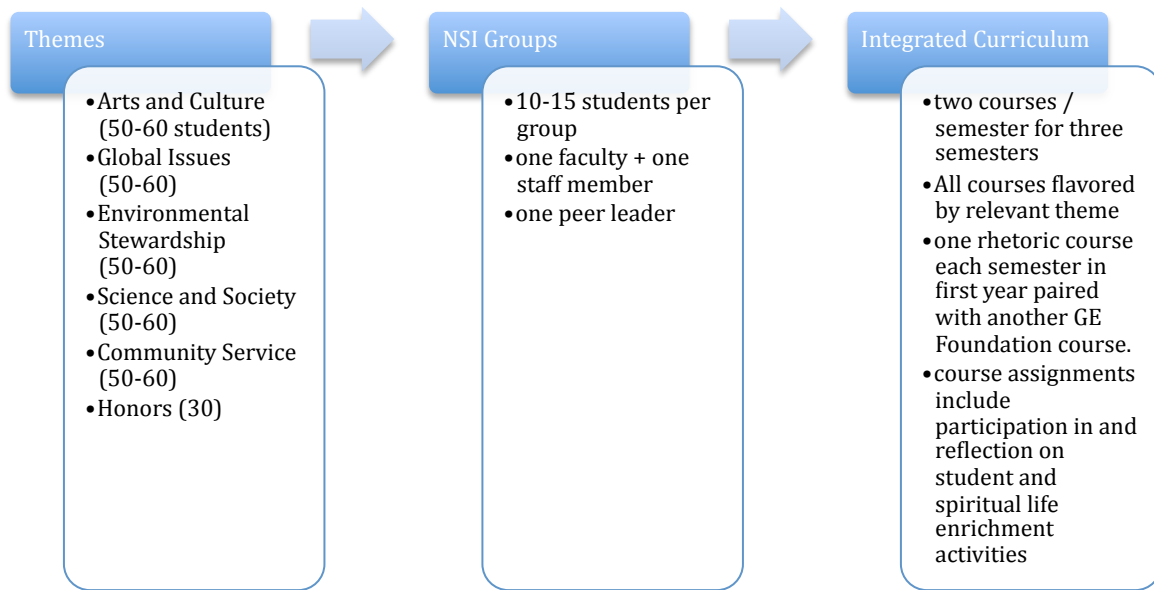
At SNU Learning Communities will

- 1) Create small groups of faculty, students and staff that will work together to establish academic and social networks that intentionally support learning both inside and outside the classroom.

- 2) Explore themes in which students have expressed interest.
- 3) Socialize students to what it means to be a college student, with particular focus on the need to take responsibility for one's learning, to actively engage in learning activities, to learn in collaboration with faculty and peers, and to live and learn in a community of scholars in which participants interact with integrity and accountability to one another.
- 4) Provide an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum, designed by teams of faculty and staff, that promotes the development of academic skills and introduces students to SNU's identity as a Christian liberal arts university and the knowledge and skills valued by a Christ-centered community of scholars.
- 5) Provide settings for community-based delivery of student support services.
- 6) Improve retention of incoming freshmen during the first four semesters of their SNU experience.

## **Framework**

- 1) Learning Communities will be organized around themes into which students opt to participate prior to arrival on campus.
- 2) NSI groups will consist of 10-15 students, a faculty/staff member, and one (1) peer mentor. Four NSI groups, consisting of freshman students who have selected common themes, will be enrolled together into a cluster of two foundational general education courses in the 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> semesters of their SNU experience.
- 3) Course clusters will integrate curricular and co-curricular learning experiences in a manner that connects liberal arts outcomes with the particular thematic interests of the learning communities.
- 4) Tentatively, thematic learning communities will be organized around the general themes related to
  - a. Arts and Culture
  - b. Global Awareness
  - c. Environmental Stewardship
  - d. Community Service
  - e. Science and Society
  - f. Honors
- 5) A structured assessment program will be built into learning community activities to provide a basis for continued quality improvement as well as data for assessment of program objectives.



### **Success: How will we know?**

Program assessment and subsequent modification based on findings will be crucial to the success of the program. The tendency to initiate new programs without devoting adequate resources to assessment aimed at ongoing quality improvement. An important job for the team leaders of each learning community will be to work together with other learning community leaders to evaluate the elements of the program with an eye to student learning and retention.

#### Issues to assess

1. Student Satisfaction
2. Student Engagement in learning activities
3. Development of skills and knowledge pertinent to intended GE outcomes
4. Faculty integration and engagement
5. Retention Rate

## **Staffing**

Learning Community Theme Leader: responsibilities include overseeing LC staffing, scheduling, implementation and assessment. The theme leader works with other LC theme leaders to assess, maintain and improve quality of LC in achieving intended outcomes.

LC faculty work to design and teach foundational general education course. Since courses in the LC will be interdisciplinary and integrative, faculty and staff will work collaboratively in teams to facilitate student learning related to appropriate intended outcomes.

## **Budget**

\$14,000 annually per Learning Community

### **Revenue:**

~\$7000 from Student Development Budget to cover student activities.

~\$7200 from \$30/course fee attached to two FYE courses each semester.

### **Expenses:**

#### **Start up Expenses**

**Promotional Brochure:** \$360/learning community

#### **Planning and Development**

\$3000 for curriculum design (10 member team)

\$500 misc expenses (food for meetings, copies, books, etc)

#### **Annual Expenses**

##### **Events**

\$1,800 for 3 field experiences (1 @ \$20 x 3 semesters)

\$6,000 for 3 speakers (1 @ \$2,000 x 3 semesters)

\$1,500 for 2 service projects (1 @ \$500 x 3 semesters)

## **Tentative Course Descriptions**

**Rhetoric I & II:** Two semester, 4 credit each, course in which students learn to evaluate assumptions, presuppositions, and arguments embedded in various texts, construct arguments based on solid evidence acquired from appropriate sources and through the use of the best available methods, and communicate those arguments clearly and concisely using sound rhetorical strategies in both speech and writing. The course includes development of essential skills in composition and presentation technology.

**Aesthetics:** A one semester course in which students learn to evaluate artistic expressions, including the fine arts, music, drama, literature, media, and human movement (i.e., dance, sports), through the use of political, sociological, anthropological and aesthetic theories.

**Christian Faith and Practice:** A one semester course in which students are introduced to how a Christian perspective creates and deepens meaning in cultural, personal, social, and aesthetic issues; how to evaluate moral and ethical choices in light of sound interpretations of Christian scriptures, Christian traditions, and the Wesleyan theological perspective; and how Christians operationalize that analysis through active stewardship and service.

**Foundations of Math and Science:** A one semester course in which students develop the basic knowledge and skills necessary to evaluate developments in science, technology and health on the basis of elementary principles, good scientific practices, and the proper interpretation of mathematical models and statistics.

**The Modern World:** A one semester course in which students will learn to interpret and contextualize current events in light of historical, geographical, sociological, economic, and political contexts.

## **Timeline for Implementation**

### **Spring 2009**

Design one Thematic Learning Community around the Arts and Culture Theme (in anticipation of possible Kirkpatrick Foundation Grant funding...will know about this in March, but we need to be in the planning process by that time.)

Develop a flyer or brochure that explains the LC concept and the particulars of the Arts and Culture LC.

Advertise Arts and Culture LC and Honors Program to students through admissions encouraging students as many students as will to opt-in. Target 60 students max for Arts and Culture LC and 30 students for Honors Program.

### **Summer 2009**

Enroll incoming students. Participating faculty will call students in A&C Learning Community and welcome them to the LC explaining the LC concept.

Design assessment tools for assessing intended LC outcomes.

### **Fall 2009**

Implement Arts and Culture Learning Community (50-60 students) in addition to Honors Program (30 students), ACE Provisional Student Success Program. Remainder of students will be enrolled in appropriate composition courses, speech, Bib Lit, computing courses those courses as specified by the major.

### **Spring 2010**

Begin assessing 1<sup>st</sup> LC Outcomes against Arts and Culture LC, Honors Program, Block Enrollment, and ACE PSS program.

Begin designing additional four additional learning communities incorporating lessons emerging from pilot.

Advertise five thematic learning communities encouraging incoming students to select three of the five. Students will be admitted to the LC of their choice on a first come first served basis until each LC is filled.

### **Summer 2010**

Enroll incoming students in LCs.

Assess 1<sup>st</sup> year of A&C LC.

Potentially implement Summer Provisional Student Success term that will offer remediation in writing, reading, critical thinking, and university success skills to student entering the university on a provisional basis so that they have the opportunity, upon successful completion, to enter with their cohort into a thematic LC.

**Fall 2010**

Start five thematic learning community options.

**Spring 2011**

Assess Pilot Learning Community Curriculum and make assessment data available to LC teams with recommendations for possible mid-stream modification of other learning community curricula based on assessment.

Recruit incoming students in Thematic and Honors LCs.

**Summer 2011**

Enroll students in Thematic and Honors LC

ACE PSS Summer Program

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**Summer 2012**

Assess Learning Community Program in light of full experience.

**Spring 2015** Evaluate Learning Community Program in light of sunseting provisions. If by this time the program is not meeting its objective, it should be discontinued and resources devoted to it redirected.

## Important Issues for Successful Implementation

- What will faculty do in addition to teaching classes?

Mentor students in the learning community. Identify high risk students. Participate in integrated co-curricular activities. Serve as a resource to connect students with curricular and co-curricular resources.

- What about transfer students?

At this point, the thinking is that students who come in the Spring semester with 12 credit hours and successful completion of Composition I, or its equivalent, will enter into a learning community in the second semester. A student who enters the university in the Fall with 24 credit hours, and who has successfully completed Comp II, or its equivalent, will have their transcript evaluated against operating learning communities and will be accounted, for the purposes of General Education requirements, to be a 1<sup>st</sup> semester sophomore in the learning community most advantageous the student transfer hours. A transfer student entering the university with 36 credit hours or greater, and who has successfully completed Comp II, will not be required to take foundational general education courses linked into the learning community.

- What about provisionally admitted students?

Because provisionally admitted student come to the university with serious academic remediation needs, and since existing in learning communities is an important means of creating supportive communities in which these students have a greater chance of learning the skills necessary to succeed, there are a couple of possible ways to deal with these students. There are a few different possible approaches:

1. Provisional Semester Learning Community... provisionally admitted students study for one semester in a preparatory learning community experience (much as they do now under block schedule) and then enter a thematic learning community in a later semester.
2. Regular Admission plus support...provisionally admitted student enter into a regular learning community and fill out the rest of their fall (or spring if necessary) enrollment with provisional support classes (reading, composition, study skills, etc). This creates a few odd enrollments such as a student with severe writing deficiencies taking Modern English Usage at the same time as Communications I...is that appropriate?

3. Create a summer academic program for provisional students that remediate to some extent their academic weaknesses and, if they successfully complete the program, encourage them to enter as fully admitted students with their cohort in a regular thematic learning community. One problem with this model is that most provisional students normally matriculate late to SNU. This could create a program that could be a profit center/service to HS students needing summer remediation prior to entering college at colleges other than SNU if the program has additional available slots.

- How do we handle faculty load issues?

Thematic communities will consist of 50 students. Initially each community will be divided into two sections. Faculty teams of two or three faculty members will work as a team to staff these sections. Faculty will earn a minimum of 60 SCH or a 3 credit course load for teaching in a LC per semester. Faculty in the LC teams may also have the opportunity to divide up available SCH in a manner appropriate to the contributions and needs of team members.

- What about faculty and staff development and compensation?

To create successful learning communities, faculty and staff will have to work closely together as a team to design and execute a strong First Year Experience based around learning communities. Initially, faculty and staff will have to engage in development activities that introduce them to the learning community concept and then work together. Research on learning communities suggests that small stipends (~500-\$1000) for faculty member participation in program planning activity is normal. Typically each learning community has a team leader responsible for planning and oversight, assessment data collection, and serving as a member of the group overseeing the first year experience program. Faculty members serving as learning community team leaders are typically compensated with reduced load.

- What do we do with students who flunk Communications, or another of the LC courses?

- How do we handle CLEP credit?

Typically students who bring in CLEP or AP credit do so for Comp I. The communications course sequence is a combination course

responsible to introduce students to the foundational knowledge and skills necessary to achieve oral and written communication, technology, and critical thinking outcomes. Comp I CLEP or AP credit is insufficient to waive a student out of the communications sequence unless that student enters the university in the spring semester with at least 12 hours of credit. In that instance, the student will enter the learning community and enroll in the Communications II course. In other instances, CLEP credit will be counted toward general studies elective credit in the appropriate category.