Learning Communities: Then, Now, and the Future

Jenny R. Crossland & Anna Overhulser

Southern Nazarene University

Learning Communities As Paths for Success

More than eighty years after the first experimental communities, the dedicated college living-and-learning environment may be coming into its own. The trend in growth of these specialized curiculuar/co-curricular environments matches the deepening recognition that they are "effective structures for promoting curricular coherence, deeper learning, and community among students and teachers" (Laufgraben et al, 2004). A trend to accommodate a changing student landscape has emerged within higher education institutions in the United States. It is evident that colleges are now altering their methods of doing business in order to accommodate the need of their student body, including the types of academic programs and academic support that they offer. In the *U.S. News & World Report 2003 Guide to America's Best Colleges*, twenty-four learning community programs were discussed within the section entitled "Programs that Really Work". Laufgraben claims that learning communities have also been linked as an important factor that improves first year students' persistence.

There has been a long lasting connection between the liberal arts education and the idea of learning communities. According to education researchers Fox, Haddock, and Smith (2007), the idea of "learning community" was coined when the University of Wisconsin founded its testing ground, the Experimental College, in 1927. There, Alexander Meiklejohn created an intentionally designed two-year program that engendered many changes in general education theory and practice for colleges. Meiklejohn held the belief that the reorganization of the, "curriculum, pedagogy, and roles of the relationships " within the college environment were of upmost importance in preparing students for "civil engagement" within expanding American democracy. Meiklejohn believed the goal of education was to help students develop" knowledge, values, and skills (2007)" socially and academically that prepared them for their

responsibility to society. The Experimental College stressed "active learning, discussion, and collaborative work" to aid students in the development of analytical and problem-solving skills.

While the Experimental College did not have a long history, it made a lasting impact on the visions for the college experience. Several programs, including the University of California at Berkeley, San Jose State College, State University at New York Stony Brook, and the University of Maryland (Fox, Haddock, &Smith, 2007), developed their own approaches to the intentional, interdisciplinary learning/living environment in the 1970's and 1980's. These efforts demonstrate the learning community's ability to remain viable and useful within different institutional environments. Research suggests that the secondary educational institutions that implement learning communities have found them to be an effective means of fostering student retention and faculty revitalization (2007). Presently, Wagner College, St. Lawrence University, Fairhaven College, and many other colleges view learning communities as imperative to their learning environment.

The definition of a learning community is often somewhat ambiguous. This is in part because, by nature, the learning community adapts to the distinct needs and characteristics to the campus and culture that it exists within. In the book *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines (year),* Galbelnick (1990) provides a commonly accepted definition of a learning community: "Any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses- or actually restructure the material entirely- so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning experience" (p. 19). In recent years, the definition has been revised to place greater importance on the curricular nature of learning communities and the purposeful restructuring of

both the teaching and learning experience for students and faculty. The National Learning Community Project (http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/03_start_entry.asp#1) describes learning communities as thematically-driven groups of classes connected or clustered to give a cohesive whole to the experience. Many different approaches can be utilized to build these learning communities, but each approach intends "to restructure the student's time, credit, and learning experiences to build a community among students, between students and their teachers, and among faculty members and disciplines" (National Leaning Community Project, 2004)

Though learning communities are diverse and adapting, they tend to share several basic characteristics (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). The first is that they "Organize students and faculty into smaller groups and encourage integration of the curriculum." The goal of these first two components is to aid students in building academic and social support networks. The smaller groupings foster a "conducive" setting for students to be integrated into college expectations. Learning communities also tend to group faculty together in a purposeful way to build stronger relationships with students, help them with the transition to college, and amplify students' goal-setting for academic and personal growth. Each of these components and purposes are fairly universal within the learning community spectrum and are critical for creating successful learning communities.

According to Claire Sullivan's report (1990) entitled Freshmen Interest Groups at the University of Washington, the enrollment of students into these optional learning communities doubled each of the first three years, with nearly 400 students involved in the groups by 1990. Also, after the first three years of the program, every faculty surveyed indicated a belief in the success and continuance of the program. Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University found that "students in learning communities spent more time engaged in learning even after we excluded

the time they spent on learning activities within the classroom where one would expect there to be more engagement" (1998). The surveys and interviews at Syracuse also revealed that students who had before struggled in school found that "the collaborative environment of the learning community provided a safe place, a smaller knowable place of belonging, in which they were valued and in which they discovered they could learn."

Four researchers at the Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education examined and compiled the findings of an extensive sampling of research studies and assessment reports on learning communities (Taylor et. al, 2003). Their findings reveal that although few research studies have examined the nature and quality of student learning, the quantitative and achievement information such as GPA, student retention, and satisfaction ratings that has been collected solidly supports learning community programs. In a study that compared the standardized testing scores of Texas public schools utilizing learning communities with those using standard teaching structures, Teresa Hughes (2007) of Lamar University found that from 2004 to 2006, 90.6% of schools reporting to be using professional learning communities had increased Mathematics scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Sixty-three of sixty four of these schools also improved on average from 2004 to 2006 in terms of Reading and Language arts scores. The mean scores increased by an average of nine points. Over the three-year span, only 1.6% of the learning community schools had not improved their average scores overall.

In a study concerning learning communities and retention conducted at the University of California, Fairris, Peeples, and Beleche (2006) found that on average, participation in a learning community "is predicted to statistically significantly increase the retention probability by four percentage points" (p. 5). When controls were set for the cumulative GPA of the students within

learning community, it became clear that the retention probabilities increase was independent of the effect that learning communities have on academic performances. In other words, even the students whose grades did not improve because of the learning communities were more likely to return their second year. This could be because of the "network of friends and sense of connectedness to the campus" (p. 5) that often accompany learning communities.

Within an academic community, learning communities often follow one of four models. According to Laufgraben and others (2004), these models include: "paired or clustered courses, cohorts in larger courses, team taught programs, and residence- based learning communities." Each of these models is unique and appeals to different students' needs. First, paired or clustered course learning communities utilize individual instructors but group courses by themes through block scheduling. They often link disparate courses that overlap in specific skill areas. One example of this would be the linked courses of Calculus and General Chemistry, which would ideally foster an environment of scientific discovery and developed quantitative reasoning skills. Another would be a class on world civilization paired with a course on art or music, which foster a more holistic understanding of time and place in culture. Clusters typically expand on this idea and link three or four courses in a "coordinated study program." For example, a students may choose to participate in a cluster concerning "The Individual and Society" consisting of a sociology class, an English class, and a Speech class. Each of these classes is then centered around one interdisciplinary theme.

Cohorts that are compiled from a larger body of students to learn in a cooperative group are often called "interest groups"; these represent a percentage of the total enrollment with a common educational or career interest. The University of Washington uses both freshmen

Interest Groups, such as pre-law or social welfare, together, and clustered courses to create a "conducive learning community" (Sullivan, 1990).

The third model, the team-taught program, is perhaps the most extensive approach in terms of integration of the curriculum and faculty involvement (Laufgraben et al, 2004). The interest groups might attend regular classes but meet with each other and several professors on a regular basis to share knowledge and discuss questions, fears, applications, and current issues regularly. Often times peer groups are established to continue the collaborative effect. The purpose of this model of a learning community is that students and faculty focus on collaboration and both bringing meaningful attributes to the learning process.

The fourth type, the residence-based program, allows physical community to become part of the grouping process for like-minded students. Allotted study areas and required study hours might be implemented, and students share both the housing facility and the learning theme of their academic program. In some cases, upper-class residents of a particular living-learning community take on the role of mentor to underclassmen to further foster inclusion and growth within the program. The core goal of residential-based programs is to maximize learning by embedding cultural, community participation within the academic environment.

Learning communities have become increasingly useful within academia in the past decade as higher education has been forced to face rising tuition, sky rocketing enrollment projects, and diminished state funding (Laufgraben et al, 2004). The past several years have proven to be a time of universal growth within higher education (Adelman, 1999). More than 70 percent of all students who graduate high school go onto some type of postsecondary education. Approximately one-third of all students in four- year institutions begin their college careers in a community college; and many students enrolling in four-year colleges take one or more courses

at colleges other than the one from which they graduate (Adelman, 1999). While more people are aspiring to be college students, research suggests that fewer and fewer people are prepared for success within the college environment. Education researchers Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) report that forty percent of students in four-year institution take remedial courses, and more than sixty percent of community college students require remedial education. The need for learning communities becomes apparent in these statistics. Learning communities, specifically the cohort model, could be the solution to bridge the gap between the academic level that students bring to college and the one they are expected to have when they leave.

Learning communities have gained widespread acceptance as a way to engage students in college communities socially and academically (Evenbeck & Borden 2003). A survey study done by Evenbeck and Borden in 2003 found that Institutions that have implemented learning communities have reported higher grades, higher attendance, and fewer disciplinary problems. Students also report feelings of "ownership" of their academic experience within learning communities. Learning communities offer a new and transformative way to think about liberal arts education (Fox ,Haddock ,& Smith, 2007). They offer a more effective plan to concentrate time and energy as well as give students greater coherence within academia. Each of these goals strives to create and maintain a dynamic environment that encourages innovation and student involvement. It is because of the success of these programs that a recent survey of First Year Academic Practices at secondary educational institutions in the United States shows that learning communities are being utilized in many different types of educational institutions, in at least an experimental fashion (Taylor et. al, 2003).

While it is evident in recent years the number of learning communities has increased, there are still many possibilities that need to be further researched. For example, some learning

communities are expanding even outside of the college campus. Some now include programs that foster civic engagement or service learning, or link schools and colleges through K-16 partnerships. Thus, the learning community continues to grow and morph according to the needs of the students. In a many different of types of secondary academic settings and in many forms, learning communities have been linked to raise student retention and academic performance, increase student activity and goal directed behavior, improve students' degree completion time, as well as enriching the student's academic maturity. (Taylor et. al, 2003). As a university, the current information about the effects of learning communities should be evaluated to see if they would be helpful to achieve the core mission of higher education in America: " To develop mature citizens who are ready to live socially responsible lives and who come of age in institutions that foster best practices of a civil society".

References

Adelman, C. *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelors Degree Attainment.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, OERI, 1999.

Evenbeck, V.M., & Borden, V.M. (2003, July-August). Assessing the impact of learning communities: Research in progress. *Ebsco Publishing 13*(4). 4-9.

Fox, A., Haddock, J., & Smith, T. (2007, September). A network biography: reflecting on a journey from birth to maturity of a networked learning community. *Curriculum Journal*, *18*(3), 287-306.

Fairris, D., Peeples, J., Beleche, T. (2006). Evaluation of the Impact of Participation in First Year Learning Communities on Persistence to Sophomore Year. University of California, Riverside.

Galbelnick, F., MacGregor,J., Matthews, R. S., and Smith, B.L. Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines. *New directions for teaching and learning, 41.* San Francisco: Jossey- Bass, 1990.

Hughes, T. A. (2007). Professional Learning Communities and the Positive Effects on Student Achievement: A National Agenda for School Improvement. *The Lamar university Electronic Journal of Student Research.* Lamar University.

Laufgraben, J., & Shapiro, N. *Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities* .San Francisco: Jossey- Bass, 2004.

Shapiro, N. S., and Levine, J. H. *Creating Learning Communities: A Practical Guide to Winning Support, Organizing for Change, and Implementing Programs.*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1999.

Sullivan, C.F. (1990). Freshmen Interest Groups at the University of Washington: Building community for freshmen at a large university. Washington Center News.

Taylor, K., Moore, W.S., MacGregor, J., Lindbald, J. (2003). Learning Community Research and Assessment: What we know now, executive summary. Washington center for Improving Undergraduate education.

http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=78,

http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/lcFaq.htm#28

Tinto, V. (1998). Learning Communities: building gateways to student success. *The National Teaching and Learning Forum, 7*(4). Syracuse University. Retrieved 3/27/09 from

http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/suppmat/74tinto.htm

Venezia, A., Kirst, M. W., and Antonio, A.L. *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Students Aspirations.* Stanford, CA: The Bridge Project, 2003.