OLA Research Project: Learning Communities at the Crossroads

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Home institution: Ohio University
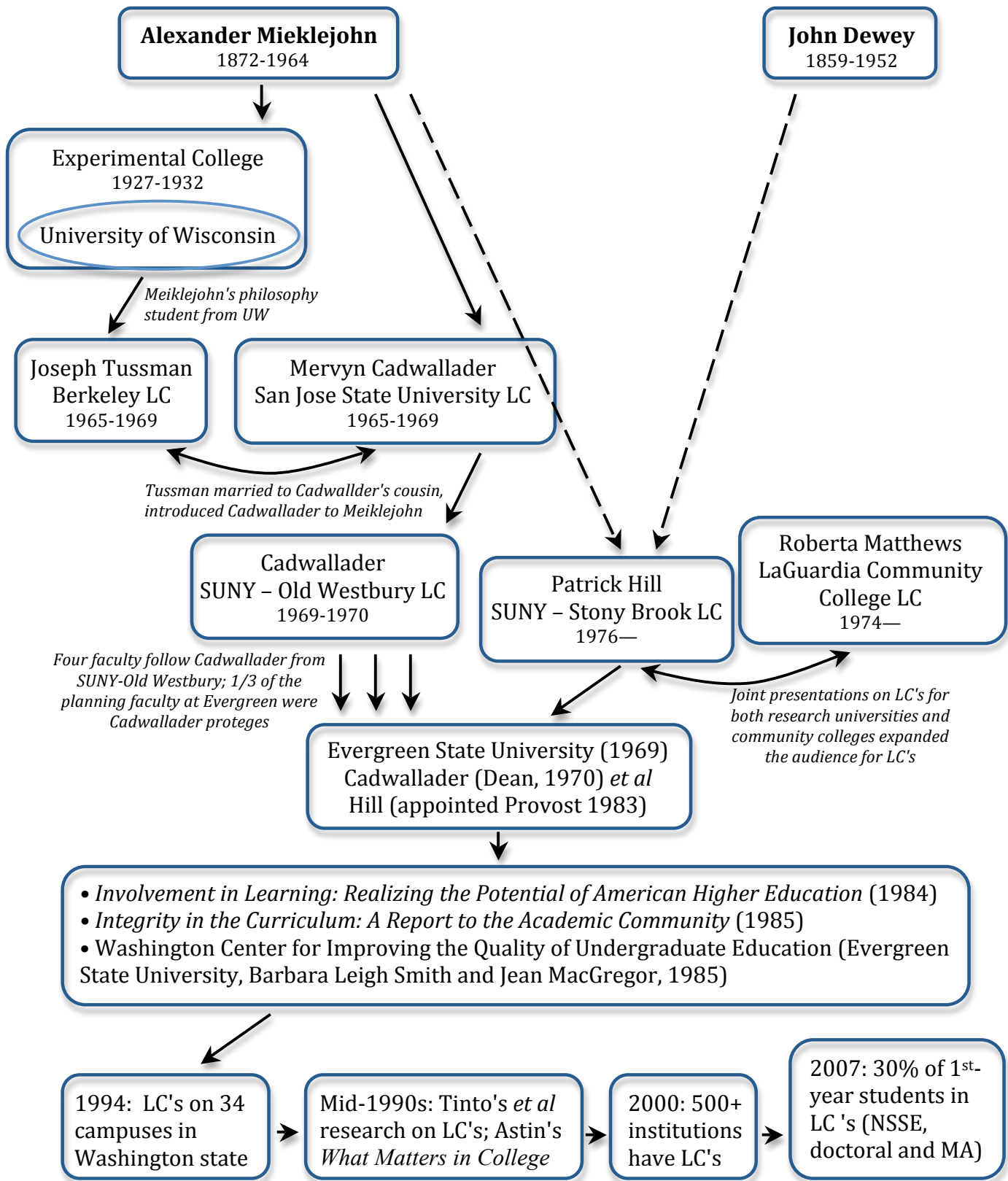Mentoring institution: Linda Caron, Associate Dean College of Liberal Arts
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ABSTRACT: Although learning communities date back to the 1920s, the modern resurgence of learning communities began in the 1980s. By 2000, more than five hundred institutions offered learning communities; by 2007, 30% of first-year students at doctoral-extensive and master's institutions were enrolled in a learning community. Studies have shown that when done well, learning communities can make a critical difference in student success, especially for some minority and underprepared populations. Despite the growth in learning communities, they have remained an "add-on" component rather than being fully integrated into the curriculum and structure of the institution. In addition, institutional goals and assessments of learning communities (retention, transition to college) are not always the same as the broader educational objectives of learning communities (academic inquiry, integrated knowledge). Learning communities have not yet scaled up to the level where they transform the structure of the university. This paper looks at the entwined history of learning communities, general education, and liberal education; the current data on learning community effectiveness; the challenges now facing learning communities; and the possible future evolution of learning communities.

Example 1: A Brief History of Learning Communities

Alexander Mieklejohn
1872-1964

John Dewey
1859-1952

Experimental College
1927-1932

University of Wisconsin

*Meiklejohn's philosophy
student from UW*

Joseph Tussman
Berkeley LC
1965-1969

Mervyn Cadwallader
San Jose State University LC
1965-1969

*Tussman married to Cadwallder's cousin,
introduced Cadwallader to Meiklejohn*

Cadwallader
SUNY – Old Westbury LC
1969-1970

Patrick Hill
SUNY – Stony Brook LC
1976—

Roberta Matthews
LaGuardia Community
College LC
1974—

*Four faculty follow Cadwallader from
SUNY-Old Westbury; 1/3 of the
planning faculty at Evergreen were
Cadwallader proteges*

*Joint presentations on LC's for
both research universities and
community colleges expanded
the audience for LC's*

Evergreen State University (1969)
Cadwallader (Dean, 1970) *et al*
Hill (appointed Provost 1983)

• *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education* (1984)
• *Integrity in the Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community* (1985)
• Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education (Evergreen
State University, Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor, 1985)

1994: LC's on 34
campuses in
Washington state

Mid-1990s: Tinto's *et al*
research on LC's; Astin's
What Matters in College

2000: 500+
institutions
have LC's

2007: 30% of 1st-
year students in
LC 's (NSSE,
doctoral and MA)

Example 2: Learning Community Models[1]

1) Learning Communities within Courses that Are Unmodified

Common courses with LC cohort shaded
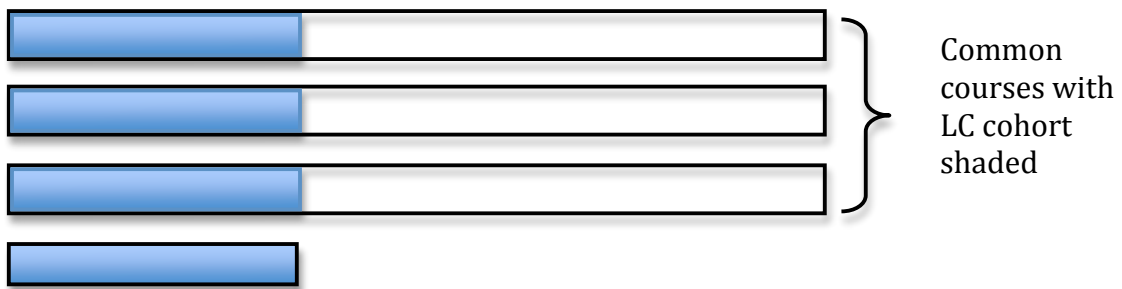
Freshman seminar/interest group or integrative seminar/colloquoy

2) Learning communities of linked or clustered classes

Pure cohorts

Integrative seminar
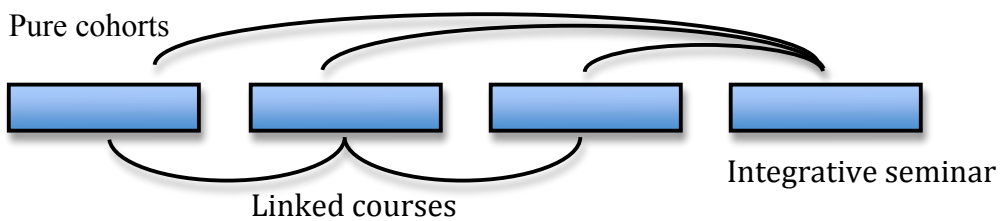
Linked courses

Small course(s) linked to larger course(s)

Linked courses

3) Team-taught learning communities

Common syllabus

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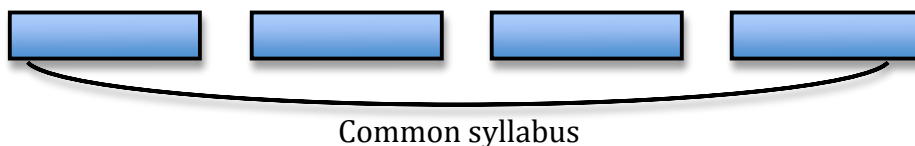
[1] This categorization is based on Barbara Leigh Smith, Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Faith Gabelnick, *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 70-89.

Example 3: Learning Community Data

General Effects[2]	Impact on Underserved Students	Moderating Variables	Research Issues
• Higher grades • Higher persistence rates • Ease of college transition • Higher levels of academic engagement • Greater interaction with faculty and peers • Perception of campus as more supportive • Self-report of critical thinking gains • Gains for intellectual development • Higher levels of integrative thinking • Gains in writing and reading skills • Greater appreciation for and engagement with diversity/different viewpoints • Higher rates of civic engagement	• Higher grades • Higher persistence rates • Ease of college transition • Greater interaction with faculty and peers • Helps build identity as learner/recognize academic potential • Sense of belonging • Gains for intellectual development	• Variability of learning community formulation/type (residential, non-residential, linked courses, etc.) • Degree of faculty and student interaction • Classroom environment (positive, negative mixed)	• Predominance of single-institution studies • Variability of learning community formulation/type • Lack of specificity about learning community elements to make comparisons between formulations • Short-term nature of most research • Reliance on self-reported data • Examinations of outcomes for specific populations rare

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[2] This chart is from Jayne E. Brownwell and Lynn E. Swaner, *Five High-Impact Practices* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010), p. 47.

Example 4: General Education and Learning Community Practices and Objectives

Learning Communities	Liberal Education[3]	General Education[4]
Foster sense of community and shared purposed among learners and their teachers	Make a commitment to multiculturalism	Making a successful adjustment to college
Create curricular coherence and connections among courses and ideas; intentional integration	**Elevate general education and integration rather than specialization**	Learning and honing academic skills in writing, speaking, quantitative reasoning critical thinking, and technological and information literacy
Teach skills in a meaningful context	Promote the commonweal and citizenship	Developing the academic maturity needed to undertake study in the major
Develop students' capacity for social and academic connections	Regard all levels of education as belonging to a common enterprise and working together	Establishing patterns of academic effort
Co-curricular experiences	Re-conceive the purpose of teaching as stimulating learning and inquiry	Attaining breadth of knowledge that is meaningful and lasting
Create autonomous and independent learners	Promote the formation of values and the practice of service	Gaining content knowledge
Diversity	Employ assessment	Exploring possible majors
Active Learning		Gaining civic sensibilities
Integration		Understanding diversity
Reflection and Assessment		**Gaining integrative abilities**
		Developing values, ethical thinking

Example 5: Typical Institutional Goals for Learning Communities

- To adjust to college
- Create learning-based peer networks
- Improve the academic success of first-year students
- Improve student retention from the freshman to sophomore year
- Increase student satisfaction with the university
- Increase student-faculty interaction outside the classroom
- To develop and grow personally
- To explore career development

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[3] Bruce Kimball, "Toward Pragmatic Liberal Education," in *The Condition of American Liberal Education*, ed. R. Orrill (New York: College Board, 1995).

[4] Smith et al, *Learning Communities*, 142. See also the "Essential Learning Outcomes" in the Association of American Collegs and Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2007), 12.

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