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

- **Experimental College**
  1927-1932
- **University of Wisconsin**

**John Dewey**
1859-1952

**Joseph Tussman**
Berkeley LC
1965-1969

- **Mervyn Cadwallader**
  San Jose State University LC
  1965-1969

- **Patrick Hill**
  SUNY – Stony Brook LC
  1976—

**Robert Matthews**
LaGuardia Community College LC
1974—

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

- **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)

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

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

- **Tussman married to Cadwallader’s cousin, introduced Cadwallader to Mieklejohn**

- **Meiklejohn’s philosophy student from UW**
Example 2: Learning Community Models

1) Learning Communities within Courses that Are Unmodified

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

2) Learning communities of linked or clustered classes

- Pure cohorts
- Linked courses
- Integrative seminar
- Small course(s) linked to larger course(s)

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Effects²</th>
<th>Impact on Underserved Students</th>
<th>Moderating Variables</th>
<th>Research Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Higher grades</td>
<td>• Higher grades</td>
<td>• Variability of learning community formulation/type (residential, non-residential, linked courses, etc.)</td>
<td>• Predominance of single-institution studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Higher persistence rates</td>
<td>• Higher persistence rates</td>
<td>• Degree of faculty and student interaction</td>
<td>• Variability of learning community formulation/type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ease of college transition</td>
<td>• Ease of college transition</td>
<td>• Classroom environment (positive, negative mixed)</td>
<td>• Lack of specificity about learning community elements to make comparisons between formulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Higher levels of academic engagement</td>
<td>• Greater interaction with faculty and peers</td>
<td>• Helps build identity as learner/recognize academic potential</td>
<td>• Short-term nature of most research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Greater interaction with faculty and peers</td>
<td>• Sense of belonging</td>
<td>• Gains for intellectual development</td>
<td>• Reliance on self-reported data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Perception of campus as more supportive</td>
<td>• Gains in writing and reading skills</td>
<td>• Higher levels of integrative thinking</td>
<td>• Examinations of outcomes for specific populations rare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-report of critical thinking gains</td>
<td>• Greater appreciation for and engagement with diversity/different viewpoints</td>
<td>• Gains for intellectual development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gains for intellectual development</td>
<td>• Higher rates of civic engagement</td>
<td>• Predominance of single-institution studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Helps build identity as learner/recognize academic potential</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example 4: General Education and Learning Community Practices and Objectives

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

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


Representative Bibliography


Tinto, Vincent and A. Goodsell, "A Longitudinal Study of Freshman Interest Groups at the University of Washington." A Study by the National Center for Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment, University Park: Penn State University, 1993.
