Learning Communities Done Well

Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College

Defining “learning communities” from the field’s perspective
What are the essential features of “learning communities”? For several decades educators have agreed that learning communities—whether newly-minted or long-established—minimally include the following three components:

- A common cohort of students who attend two or more classes together
- Robust partnerships between academic affairs and student support services
- Explicitly designed opportunities for integrative learning

In our work with two- and four-year institutions across the country, we have visited a range of diverse learning community programs and discussed the effectiveness of learning communities as a student success intervention strategy with many practitioners. These experiences have taught us that “learning communities” vary widely from students who are simply registered in two classes without students’ or faculty members’ knowledge to learning communities which include the three essential components named above… and more.

Learning communities done well
Learning communities done well—wherever they are located, whoever the students served, and whatever their size—have distinguishing characteristics beyond the definitional features. The overarching notion is that learning communities are an intervention strategy for student success and quality education. The common characteristics include the following:

- A strategically-defined cohort of students based on campus data regarding student needs
- Alignment with institutional mission and goals
- A broad base of support across divisions, including key administrators
- Robust partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs
- Infrastructure and leadership that promotes collaboration
- A focus on integrative, applied and interdisciplinary learning
- Established ongoing faculty development and professional learning
- Assessment at several levels—including the classroom, program, and campus—using both quantitative and qualitative methods

~ Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich, Co-Directors, Washington Center National Summer Institute on Learning Communities, July 2012
Fostering students’ abilities to integrate learning—across courses, over time, and between campus and community life—is one of the most important goals and challenges of higher education. The undergraduate experience can be a fragmented landscape of general education courses, preparation for the major, co-curricular activities, and “the real world” beyond the campus. But an emphasis on integrative learning can help undergraduates put the pieces together and develop habits of mind that prepare them to make informed judgments in the conduct of personal, professional, and civic life.

Integrative learning comes in many varieties: connecting skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences; applying theory to practice in various settings; utilizing diverse and even contradictory points of view; and, understanding issues and positions contextually. Significant knowledge within individual disciplines serves as the foundation, but integrative learning goes beyond academic boundaries. Indeed, integrative experiences often occur as learners address real-world problems, unscripted and sufficiently broad to require multiple areas of knowledge and multiple modes of inquiry, offering multiple solutions and benefiting from multiple perspectives.

Many colleges and universities are creating opportunities for more integrative, connected learning through first-year seminars, learning communities, interdisciplinary studies programs, capstone experiences, individual portfolios, advising, student self-assessment, and other initiatives. Often, however, such innovations involve only small numbers of students or exist in isolation, disconnected from other parts of the curriculum and from other reform efforts. But a variety of opportunities to develop the capacity for integrative learning should be available to all students throughout their college years, and should be a cornerstone of a twenty-first century education.

Students need programs of study that will help them understand the nature and advantages of integrative learning and assist them in pursuing their college experience in more intentionally connected ways. They also need courses designed by creative faculty that model and build integrative skills, and curricula that define pathways that encourage integrative learning within and across fields. Wider collaboration between academic and nonacademic staff, college and community, four-year and two-year institutions, higher education and K-12 will create further opportunities for integrative learning throughout students’ educational careers.

It is important for educators to work together to build knowledge about integrative learning in its many varieties, and about how it is best encouraged and assessed. Developing students’ capacities for integrative learning is central to personal success, social responsibility, and civic engagement in today’s global society. Students face a rapidly-changing and ever-more-interconnected world, in which integrative learning becomes not just a benefit... but a necessity.

This statement was developed in conjunction with the national project, Integrative Learning: Opportunities to Connect. March 2004.