



## CHAPTER ONE

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# INTRODUCTION: THE WHAT AND WHY OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Learning community programs have steadily increased in number as more institutions have recognized learning communities as effective structures for promoting curricular coherence, deeper learning, and community among students and teachers. The shape of higher education has also adjusted to the new realities of shifting demographics and economics. Surveys have just begun to track the pervasiveness of learning communities in higher education. A 2002 national survey of first-year academic practices conducted by the Policy Center on the First Year of College found that 62 percent of responding institutions reported “enrolling at least some cohorts of students into two or more courses” (Barefoot, 2002).

College guides now recognize that many colleges and universities have changed the way they do business in terms of the delivery of academic programs and support resources. Several now include features and rankings that identify programs, including learning communities that promote more meaningful undergraduate experiences. The *U.S. News & World Report 2003 Guide to America's Best Colleges* featured a new section on “Programs That Really Work,” including a ranking of twenty-four learning communities initiatives. In a 2001 issue, *Time* honored four colleges that “know how to help newcomers survive and thrive” (McGrath, 2001, p. 3). Learning communities are described as one approach that improves first-year student persistence, and Seattle Central Community College was profiled for its extensive efforts on behalf of learning communities.

Several national survey instruments, including the National Survey of Student Engagement and the First-Year Initiative Survey, now include questions to identify students participating in learning communities so the impact of participation can be explored in depth. Results from the 2001 First-Year Initiative (FYI) Survey showed that linking first-year seminars with other academic courses reveals some advantages. In the pilot administration of the FYI instrument, 11 percent of participating campuses reported linking 80 percent or more of their first-year seminars to other courses. An additional 16 percent of survey participants linked 20 to 79 percent of their sections. When controlling for “required” (if seminar required), grading, content, and theme, sections of first-year seminars linked to learning communities had greater learning outcomes for academic skills, study skills, critical thinking, and engaging pedagogy (Swing, 2002).

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## What Is a Learning Community?

In *Creating Learning Communities*, we described several uses of the term “learning communities” (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). The intent was to illustrate that, within the universe of learning communities, there is a sense that no “one size fits all,” and classifications, as well as models of learning communities, vary as needed to adapt to distinct campus cultures. In both *Creating Learning Communities* and this book, however, the focus is on curricular learning communities. As a common reference point, we offer the often-cited definition from the 1990 Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith monograph, *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*: “. . . 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 enterprise” (p. 19).

Recently, this definition has been revised to place greater emphasis on the curricular nature of learning communities and the intentional restructuring of teaching and learning experiences for students and faculty: “In higher education, curricular learning communities are classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common

cohort of students. A variety of approaches are used to build these learning communities, with all intended to restructure the students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, between students and their teachers, and among faculty members and disciplines" (National Learning Communities Project website, [http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/03\\_start\\_entry.asp#1](http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/03_start_entry.asp#1)).

Learning communities initiatives share several basic characteristics. Learning communities

- Organize students and faculty into smaller groups
- Encourage integration of the curriculum
- Help students establish academic and social support networks
- Provide a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college
- Bring faculty together in more meaningful ways
- Focus faculty and students on learning outcomes
- Provide a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs
- Offer a critical lens for examining the first-year experience (Shapiro and Levine, 1999, p. 3)

If you scan the websites or literature of many learning community programs, you will find mission or goal statements that include many of these characteristics. Table 1.1 includes some examples.

**TABLE 1.1. GOAL AND MISSION STATEMENTS**

Program	Mission or Goal Statement
Temple University <a href="http://www.temple.edu/lc">www.temple.edu/lc</a>	The Learning Communities at Temple University aim to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote the integration of knowledge across disciplines</li> <li>• Support students' transition to college level learning</li> <li>• Enhance connections between and among students and teachers</li> </ul>

TABLE 1.1. Continued

Program	Mission or Goal Statement
University of Maryland College Park Scholars  <a href="http://scholars.umd.edu/">http://scholars.umd.edu/</a>	College Park Scholars is a collaborative living-learning community at the University of Maryland with the following goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To promote academic excellence, integrity, critical thinking, and creativity through the development of interdisciplinary knowledge, skills, and perspectives</li> <li>• To foster the development of a supportive and inclusive community of diverse students, faculty, and staff</li> <li>• To enhance the students' intellectual and personal development through service, experiential learning, and innovative curricular and co-curricular activities both on and off campus</li> <li>• To create an environment that enhances student development as life-long leaders, citizens, and scholars</li> </ul>
Western Washington University  <a href="http://www.wwu.edu/depts/figs/">http://www.wwu.edu/depts/figs/</a>  FIGS: Freshman interest groups	The goal of the FIG is to create a learning community environment for first-year students, one that fosters their academic success and helps them connect one-on-one with faculty and peers.
St. Lawrence University  <a href="http://web.stlawu.edu/fyp/history.htm">http://web.stlawu.edu/fyp/history.htm</a>  FYP: First-year program	The FYP has four components, each of which can be mapped to one of the original concerns that gave birth to the program. However, the overarching goal of the FYP is the integration of the parts into a comprehensive educational experience for students and faculty alike. The FYP has become a model in contemporary higher education for its success in weaving together the strands of college life that are typically separated by departments and divisions. The fabric of the FYP is a tapestry woven of these four threads: the course, the communication skills component, the advising component, and the residential component.

Program	Mission or Goal Statement
UCLA (College of Letters and Science) <a href="http://www.college.ucla.edu/ge/clusters/">http://www.college.ucla.edu/ge/clusters/</a>	The College's General Education Cluster Program is a curricular initiative that is designed to strengthen the intellectual skills of entering freshmen, introduce them to faculty research work, and expose them to such "best practices" in teaching as seminars and interdisciplinary study.
LaGuardia Community College <a href="http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/stuinfo/firstyear/learningcomm.asp">http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/stuinfo/firstyear/learningcomm.asp</a>	LaGuardia's learning communities reflect a truly integrated practice: each is organized around a theme, and faculty meet regularly to plan, refine, and evaluate curriculum integration and student success.
Daytona Beach Community College <a href="http://www.dbcc.cc.fl.us/academics/learningcommunity/index.htm">http://www.dbcc.cc.fl.us/academics/learningcommunity/index.htm</a>	A Learning Community is a nurturing, supportive educational environment that is the outcome of organizing courses and related educational activities in such a way that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any participating group of students spends more time together than they would if they were only in a single course together.</li> <li>• Courses and activities are linked to one another.</li> <li>• Faculty and staff are sensitive and responsive to students' education needs.</li> </ul>

## Models

Learning communities can take different forms and be located in different places in the academic program. There are, however, four commonly described approaches or models for configuring learning communities: (1) paired or clustered courses, (2) cohorts in large courses or FIGs (freshman interest groups), (3) team-taught programs, and (4) residence-based learning communities, models that intentionally link the classroom-based learning community with a residential life component. The Learning Communities Directory maintained by the National Learning Communities Project in partnership with the Washington

Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at the Evergreen State College is a useful resource for locating examples of learning community programs: <http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/>.

### Paired or Clustered Courses

Paired- or clustered-course learning communities link individually taught courses through cohort and often block scheduling (scheduling of courses in back-to-back time slots). The paired-course model links two courses and is considered a basic approach to learning communities in terms of curricular integration. A paired-course learning community typically enrolls a group of twenty to thirty students in two courses. Offerings tend to be existing courses that traditionally enroll significant numbers of first-year students. One of the two courses in the pairing is usually a basic composition or communications course. These courses tend to be more interdisciplinary in nature and promote a classroom environment in which students and faculty get to know each other (Levine Laufgraben, 2004; MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2002; Shapiro and Levine, 1999).

In paired-course learning communities, classes are often linked based on logical curricular connections and skill areas. For example, a pairing of calculus with general chemistry can promote scientific discovery and quantitative reasoning skills, whereas a pairing of Introduction to Sociology and College Writing could emphasize exploration of the self and society. Pairings might also include a section of a one- to three-credit student success or first-year experience course.

Clusters expand the paired-course model by linking three or four individually taught courses around a theme. Clusters are often small and usually enroll cohorts of twenty to thirty students. One course tends to be a writing course, and the cluster usually includes a weekly seminar. The weekly seminar plays an important role in helping students and faculty build curricular connections between the courses. These seminars are ideal settings for synthesis and community-building activities. Some cluster models include larger lecture-type courses in which the student cohort enrolls as a subset but then also enrolls in a smaller cluster-only seminar or writing class.

### Cohorts in Large Courses

These learning communities are often referred to as “FIGs”—freshman interest groups. FIGs are the simplest model in terms of organization and cost (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990). This approach works well at large universities or at other institutions where freshmen are typically enrolled in at least one or two large lecture courses in which the learning communities students

represent a subset of the total enrollment. When a large lecture course also requires enrollment in a smaller recitation or discussion session, FIG students are typically enrolled in a designated learning community section. In addition to one or two large courses, FIGs typically include a smaller writing course and a weekly seminar limited to FIG students. An undergraduate peer teacher typically leads the weekly seminar (Levine Laufgraben, 2004; MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2002; Shapiro and Levine, 1999).

A less commonly used approach is the federated learning community in which student cohorts enroll in larger courses along with a teacher who serves as master learner. The federated learning community integrates courses around a theme. The master learner facilitates a weekly seminar to help students synthesize what they are learning. The master learner usually has no teaching responsibilities beyond the federated learning community (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990).

### **Team-Taught Programs**

Team-taught learning communities, also called coordinated studies programs, enroll varying numbers of students in two or more courses organized around an interdisciplinary theme. Team-taught programs represent the most extensive approach in terms of curricular integration and faculty involvement. Some require full-time faculty and student involvement, but participation can also be part-time, involving two to five courses. On many campuses, the learning community constitutes students' entire schedules for at least one semester and sometimes an entire academic year.

Themes are faculty-generated and interdisciplinary. Themes can be broad and liberal arts based, emphasize skill development in related disciplines, or prepare students for study or practice in professions. Small group discussion sections are an important part of the community. Students and a faculty member break off into smaller groups to build upon what is being learned in the other courses in the community or discuss assigned texts (book seminars).

Total community enrollment varies but can range from forty to seventy-five students. In larger team-taught programs, the cohort is often subdivided into smaller seminar groups to achieve a faculty-to-student ratio of one faculty member to twenty or twenty-five students (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990). Due to increasing fiscal pressures, typical enrollment in these programs are now more likely to be closer to seventy-five students and three teachers, with a teacher-student ratio of twenty-five to one (Levine Laufgraben, 2004; MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2002; Shapiro and Levine, 1999).

## Residence-Based Programs

A fourth approach to learning communities, residence-based programs, involves the adaptation of a particular curricular model to include a residential component. (Chapter Eight discusses living-learning programs in greater detail.) A primary goal of residence-based education is the integration of students' living and academic environments. Residence-based learning communities go beyond assigning students with similar majors to the same floor of a residence hall. In residence-based learning communities, intentionally organized student cohorts enroll in specified curricular offerings and reside in dedicated living space.

Residence-based learning communities are designed to integrate diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences. For this reason, residence-based learning communities may be the most radical of the four learning communities approaches because they require change within multiple university systems: curriculum, teaching, and housing (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). The curricular component of residence-based programs typically resembles one of the three learning communities approaches described above: clusters, FIGS, or team-taught programs. Academic and co-curricular community activities are scheduled in residence halls, and in many instances classes actually meet in classrooms located in residential spaces (Levine Laufgraben, 2004; MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2002; Shapiro and Levine, 1999).

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## Why Learning Communities? Understanding Learning Communities in the Current Context of Undergraduate Education

The rationale for learning communities is discussed in greater detail in *Creating Learning Communities* (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). The justification for learning communities, however, is also raised in this chapter, in the context of program improvement and sustainability, since more recent reports and research point to the ongoing need for reform in undergraduate education. Understanding the structure and purpose of learning communities helps explain why learning communities are a particularly useful curricular model for the current context of undergraduate education. For the past ten years, higher education has been coming to terms with a new reality. Funding challenges include rising tuition, skyrocketing enrollment projections, and diminishing state funding for public institutions. There is also pressure from business and industry to focus on workforce development in place of traditional liberal education values.

The past several decades have led to a growing universality for higher education, which has resulted in a rapidly changing demographic profile. More than 70 percent of all high school graduates go on to some form of postsecondary

education. About one-third of all students in four-year institutions begin their college careers in community colleges, and many students enrolling in four-year programs take one or more courses at colleges other than the one from which they graduate (Adelman, 1999).

While more students aspire to attend college, research suggests that fewer and fewer are prepared to succeed. Forty percent of students in four-year institutions take remedial courses, and more than 60 percent of community college students require remedial education (Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio, 2003). The implications of these realities for students lead more institutions to consider cohort models, such as learning communities, to bridge the gap between what students bring to college and what they expect to take with them when they leave.

Because of the expanding role that higher education now plays in American society, it is both easier and harder to grasp the distinguishing features of the traditional “undergraduate” experience. On-line courses, distance education options, the growing role of community colleges, the increasing number of nontraditional-aged students, and the rising costs of college all contribute to this phenomenon. Colleges and universities see learning communities as one effective way to create greater coherence for college students.

In the current climate of K–16 school reform, public four-year colleges and universities are expected to create seamless transitions from high school to college. This requires clarifying their standards and providing support services for an entering student population that is increasingly diverse, with a higher percentage of first-generation students than ever before. According to a national survey (“The Chronicle Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education,” 2003), public opinion is still very favorable toward higher education, as compared to attitudes toward public schools. However, the public wants evidence of the value of higher education: evidence of student persistence, actual performance, what subjects students study, student engagement with effective practices, and overall effects of college on students (Edgerton, 2003).

Many national commissions that have initiated recent higher education reform studies raise questions about the quality of the undergraduate experience and the intended outcomes of the undergraduate curriculum. A number of national reports, including those funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Carnegie Foundation, and the U.S. Department of Education, specifically addressed the changing nature of higher education. These reports shared some basic assumptions:

1. That higher education cannot continue to operate in a “silo” separate from the K–12 education community
2. That the current college-going population is dramatically different from the earlier, traditional-aged student population

3. That the public, which previously left higher education to provide its own quality control, now demands increased public accountability

### **AACU's Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College**

In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) convened a national panel to assess and make recommendations about the overall outcomes of a college education, including general education. The *Greater Expectations* report took stock of the current American college-going population and the American college experience. Over a period of two years, the panel convened hearings and site visits, identified best practices, and arrived at consensus about the goals of a liberal education after identifying twenty-two exemplary institutions. The findings are predicated on new understandings about the role college education plays in contemporary American society and offer a good starting point for reevaluating undergraduate education.

The panel asked the question, “What is the learning that students need for the twenty-first century?” The response: “practical liberal education” (p. xi). The panel called for students to become “intentional learners, who can adapt to new environments, integrate knowledge from different sources, and continue learning throughout their lives” (p. xi). The report defined general education as “the part of a liberal education curriculum shared by all students at an institution, it provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing important intellectual and civic capacities” (p. 25). This report suggested that content, without active, engaged learning, will not fulfill the “greater expectations” for higher education in the twenty-first century.

They called for higher education to create academic curricula and structures that will engage students in “deep learning,” preparing them not just for the workforce but also for their place in the world. They also identified four higher-level outcomes that characterize a well-educated person:

- A solid knowledge of disciplines that explore the physical and social realms, together with a grasp of their characteristic modes of inquiry and findings
- Strong analytical, communication, and practical skills—acquired and applied through study in a range of fields and through experiential learning
- An examined framework of ethical, civic, and social responsibilities—and of their implications for democratic and global citizenship
- “Intention” and integrative capacities that support continuous learning [Schneider, 2003, pp. 15–16]

## AAU: Standards for Success

The Association of American Universities (AAU) commissioned a two-year study of twenty research universities to answer one overriding question: “What must students know and be able to do in order to succeed in entry-level university courses?” The resulting report, *Standards for Success: Understanding University Success* (Conley, 2003), provides a set of articulated standards in liberal arts content areas: English, mathematics, social sciences, foreign language, science, and the arts. It is interesting that the key competencies that college faculty identified as the most critical for student success were “habits of mind that students develop in high school and bring with them to university studies.” These habits of mind include critical thinking, analytic thinking, and problem solving; an inquisitive nature and interest in taking advantage of what a research university has to offer; the willingness to accept critical feedback and adjust based on such feedback; openness to possible failures; and the ability and desire to cope with frustrating and ambiguous learning tasks (p. 8).

These outcomes parallel the description of the liberal learning outcomes described in the AACU (2002) report *Greater Expectations*. They are also often articulated as the learner-centered curricular goals of learning communities. Institutions investing in learning communities or expanding current programs should be aware of this research and dialogue driving higher education reform.

## Pew Forum on Undergraduate Education

From 2000 to 2003, Russ Edgerton, director of the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Education, convened a group of higher education innovators from across the country in a series of conferences sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The Pew Forum is an initiative that serves as an umbrella for the higher education grantees that Pew supported from 1997 to 2000 (<http://www.pewundergradforum.org>). The goal of the Pew grants to higher education in the late 1990s was to “call attention to the new twenty-first century landscape—trends such as the rising influence of the marketplace, the growing interest in what students can actually *do* with the knowledge they have acquired, the growing tendency of students to assemble courses from multiple providers, and the implications of new technologies,” according to Edgerton (<http://www.pewundergradforum.org/wp1.html>).

Edgerton (2003) identified a number of emerging concerns facing higher education. First, *students are changing*. Their lives reflect the increasing complexity of their world. They have multiple commitments; many attend more than one institution before they graduate; they invest less in learning; they are increasingly motivated by the credentialing value of college rather than by meaningful “deep

learning” associated with mature analytical thinking (Edgerton, 2003). Second, *universities and colleges are changing* as they respond to marketing pressures and new competitors. Size, scale, part-time faculties, remediation, technology—these and other trends challenge traditional academic communities to redefine themselves as well as their essential purposes and fundamental commitments. Edgerton postulates that in today’s society, it is even more urgent that higher education communicates clear goals.

America has been transformed from a country of small towns where life was whole and local to an industrial country where work is specialized to a post-industrial and truly global society. In such a society, it is harder and harder for all of us to feel connected to the expanding, larger community of which we are a part. And it is harder and harder to understand the basic decisions that control our lives or to feel that we have any control over these decisions. The challenges that complexity poses come home most dramatically when we consider the tasks and responsibilities of being a citizen in such a complex society. The average citizen now confronts an agenda of issues that have arisen from scientific/technical processes only experts truly understand. . . . One has to act on one’s beliefs. Armchair citizenship isn’t enough. To be effective citizens, people must feel that they can make a difference. Educating for a society of ever-spreading complexity involves educating for many different qualities. But above all, it involves educating for a *sense of responsibility* toward the larger community [Edgerton, 2003, p. 22].

Unless students grasp the difference between knowing and understanding and learn to be flexible and responsive in a complex and changing world, higher education will not fulfill its role in preparing the next generation for an uncertain future. In such an environment, learning communities become an important tool for organizing higher education institutions around individual learning and community responsibility.

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## Conclusion: The Current State of Learning Communities

From early reports such as *Involvement in Learning* (National Institute of Education, 1984) to more recently commissioned studies discussed here, calls for learner-centered environments that promote active and collaborative learning continue. These reports challenge colleges and universities to rethink the

traditional classroom structure and implement new models of teaching and learning that engage and partner students and faculty in the academic enterprise. Many campuses are heeding this challenge and look to learning communities to fulfill the mission of enhancing learning outcomes, as well as student success and persistence. It is not surprising then that across the higher education landscape, learning communities are considered a national movement.

In a 2001 learning communities–themed issue of *Peer Review*, Barbara Leigh Smith revisited learning communities past and present and examined the challenges facing learning community programs: “The history of learning communities is an evolving story of reformers and innovators doing their work. It is a story about the power of personal commitments and relationships in building reform efforts. It is also a story about the power of institutional structures, processes and value systems shaping our institutions. There is continuity over time with a number of themes in this learning community history. The themes of democracy, access, and classrooms as community particularly stand out” (p. 7).

Smith cautioned that the success of learning communities as a movement cannot be determined solely by the ever-growing number of programs. Established and developing programs share four important challenges: (1) student learning and faculty development, (2) diversity, (3) institutional change, and (4) purpose (p. 7). Planners of and participants in learning communities must confront these challenges at the course, community, program, and institutional levels. Many campuses focus early attention on the size of their programs or the number of communities offered. The real challenges and true measures of success, however, lie with quality of the learning communities experience and the campus’s ability to truly transform curriculum and teaching in meaningful and measurable ways.

“What matters in college” has not changed significantly since Astin authored the book by the same title in 1993. What has changed are the numerous studies and reports that confirm what we know about learning and good practice in undergraduate education, the number of institutions engaging in some type of curricular and structural reform to achieve more positive outcomes for students, and the growing demand for accountability and assessment that requires institutions to demonstrate they are meeting these outcomes. Learning communities create multidimensional learning environments and experiences for students and faculty grounded in what matters in college (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). Moving beyond the design and implementation phases of creating these types of learning environments requires deepening, broadening, and improving the scope and purpose of curricular learning communities on a campus.