

1 *Learning communities carry on a tradition of educational reform, resulting in improved student learning outcomes.*

The Growth and Current State of Learning Communities in Higher Education

Anne Goodsell Love

Learning Communities and Student Engagement

Over the past two decades, growth in learning communities (LCs) has increased steadily on college campuses (Barefoot, 2002; Smith and MacGregor, 2009). Colleges and universities of all sizes and types now implement LCs for some or all of their students, usually with the aim of improving student learning, improving students' experiences in and out of the classroom, providing integration of ideas and disciplines to combat increasing specialization and compartmentalization of disciplines, and increasing rates of student retention and degree completion. As the cost of higher education soars so have expectations for student success, and calls for undergraduate education reform appear on a regular basis. LCs are one reform effort to change how students, faculty, and student affairs professionals work together to form a more holistic learning experience, both across and within disciplines.

LCs put theory into practice by leveraging a number of components crucial to student learning and development. Alexander Astin and his colleagues at UCLA studied college students for decades and summarized much of their research this way: "The single most important environmental influence on student development is the peer group. By judicious and imaginative use of peer groups, any college or university can substantially strengthen its impact on student learning and personal development"

(Astin, 1993, p. xxii). A second influence on student learning and development is the frequency of interaction with faculty, and a third influence is the degree to which students are actively engaged and are willing to put in time and effort in learning (Astin, 1993).

In a similar vein, Vincent Tinto at Syracuse University has led the scholarship on student retention, and his search to find factors that were fundamental to increasing student retention led him to LCs. Briefly, Tinto's theory is that students' social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of college are essential factors in determining whether students will stay in college and complete their degrees (Tinto, 1987). Tinto's research on LCs demonstrated that, with their attention to learning (the intellectual integration and development) *and* community (the social realm or context in which the learning is embedded), LCs were effective in linking the social and academic lives of students (Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo, 1994).

Inspired by C. Robert Pace's earlier research that linked the "quality of student effort" with increases in student achievement (Pace, 1979), George Kuh and his colleagues at Indiana University have examined student engagement extensively and in doing so developed the National Survey of Student Engagement ("NSSE Home," n.d.). *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter* (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt, 2005) is a culmination of this research, and it begins with this assertion:

What students *do* in college counts more in terms of what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college. That is, the voluminous research on college student development shows that the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development. (Kuh and others, 2005, p. 8)

They conclude that the two key components of student engagement that contribute to student success are "the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success . . . and the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities" (Kuh and others, 2005, p. 9). They call educational programs and practices that incorporate these components "high-impact" practices and cite LCs as one example.

A further reference in making the case for the need to maximize student engagement are the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," which list factors highly correlated with high levels of student engagement (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). The seven principles are student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse

talents and ways of learning. Many programs have been developed on campuses in response to these theories, principles, and calls for action. LCs provide a unifying construct that includes students, faculty, and other campus professionals in ways that incorporate these theories and principles on campuses.

More information to support the development of LCs on campus is found in *Creating Learning Communities: A Practical Guide to Winning Support, Organizing for Change, and Implementing Programs* (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). Their follow-up book, *Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities* (Levine Laufgraben and Shapiro, 2004) reinforces the need for LCs and expands on planning and assessment, faculty development, approaching diversity through learning communities, and living-learning programs.

Definitions of Learning Communities

The term “learning community” is ubiquitous in higher education, sometimes referring to on-line courses, on-campus living arrangements, faculty research groups, or colleges and universities as a whole. Responding to calls for improvement in higher education in the 1990s, the Boyer Commission urged research universities to “foster a community of learners” (Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998, p. 34). A monograph at about the same time defined an LC as “an intentionally developed community that will promote and maximize learning” (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999, p. 8) and proposed a typology of LCs that is used in this volume: curricular LCs (interdisciplinary or intradisciplinary, across classes), classroom LCs (within singular courses), residential LCs, student-type LCs (for different demographic groups of students or students with similar interests), and virtual LCs (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999, p. 10).

As LCs have developed, the term most commonly is associated with an intentional restructuring of the curriculum and student course-taking patterns to emphasize an interdisciplinary focus with attention paid to students’ academic and social development. Long-time practitioners and champions of LCs Barbara Leigh Smith, Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Faith Gabelnick put it this way:

Learning communities are a variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional restructuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community, enhance learning, and foster connections among students, faculty, and disciplines. At their best, learning communities practice pedagogies of active engagement and reflection. (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004, p. 67)

To illustrate these various definitions, the following is a description of LCs at Wagner College, where more than one type of LC is embedded into the undergraduate curriculum. Wagner College created the Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts in 1998, with LCs and experiential learning (including service learning and civic engagement) as centerpieces of the undergraduate curriculum (Guarasci, 2006). The program “is designed to put students into their surrounding environment and to understand the practical applications of their learning throughout their Wagner experience” (Smith and MacGregor, 2009, p. 129). Enactment of this change required active involvement on the part of the faculty, most of whom were energized by the collaborative work of creating the new curriculum. All students enroll in an LC in their first semester (First-Year Program, FYP), in their intermediate years (ILC), and in the senior year (SLC). The FYP and ILC emphasize interdisciplinary learning, whereas the SLC is an intra-disciplinary combination of two courses in the major. The FYP and SLC incorporate experiential learning, civic engagement, and reflective writing in a discipline. Integration of in-class and out-of-class learning continues beyond courses, as the administrative–student affairs focus has shifted from student activities to cocurricular programs, including efforts to internationalize and diversify not just the curriculum but the campus as a whole.

The Wagner Plan also demonstrates the intentional implementation of what Smith and others refer to as LC core practices: “community, diversity, integration, active learning, and reflection/assessment” (Smith and others, 2004, p. 97). These core practices echo the theories cited previously, and help to explain the power of LCs. By addressing a number of factors that are key to enhancing student engagement and learning, LCs can reinforce and build upon the gains of each factor, potentially making the whole of the LC experience greater than the sum of its parts.

Learning Community Growth and Expansion

Most of the literature about LCs traces its roots to the 1920s and the work of John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990; Shapiro and Levine, 1999; Smith and others, 2004). Both founded experimental schools—Dewey, an elementary school; Meiklejohn, the Experimental College within the University of Wisconsin—where they could put into practice their theories about learning as a social process. Both incorporated active learning into the design of the curriculum, believing that student interaction with each other, their teachers, and their community was an essential way to place education into a democratic context (Smith and others, 2004). For example, among the innovations of Meiklejohn’s Experimental College was a required research project to be done by students during the summer between their freshman and sophomore years. Students used their hometowns as laboratories, examining various sociological and political patterns, and applying the

theories they had been learning in the classroom to the “real world” environments around them.

Another of Meiklejohn’s legacies that became manifested in LCs was the emphasis on integration of ideas across disciplines and restructuring the curriculum across courses and semesters. The Experimental College was a lower-division academic program, encompassing the first two years of study at the university, and instead of the series of separate elective courses that non-Experimental College students followed, students in the Experimental College took an integrated program of study, what we now would call an LC (Smith and others, 2004). In addition, students in the Experimental College lived together in a residence hall, as the design of the college included students’ social networks that would reinforce academic habits and culture (Smith and others, 2004). In Meiklejohn’s Experimental College can be seen the precursors to living-learning communities, LCs with experiential or service learning, and LCs with a common theme and interdisciplinary teaching, such as clusters and coordinated studies programs, that aim to transcend individual courses.

The rapid expansion of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s included the development of innovative curricular structures and programs that clustered courses, faculty, and students in ways designed to foster community, increase curricular coherence and integration, and retain a balance of education for the public good (the commitment to democratic education championed by Dewey and Meiklejohn) and education for workforce development (as community colleges were being created to do) (Smith and others, 2004). Among the innovations were subcolleges within universities, such as honors colleges, and integrated academic programs for first- and second-year students. One such innovation was created in the mid-1960s, an “Experimental Program” at the University of California at Berkeley (Smith and others, 2004; Tussman, 1969). Joseph Tussman, a professor at Berkeley (who was a student of Meiklejohn at the University of Wisconsin but after the Experimental College had ended) and his colleagues endeavored to address what they saw as the problem of the tug-of-war between the purposes of a university (the generation of new knowledge) and a college (the cultivation of minds). Making the argument that a focus on individual courses contributes to overall curricular disintegration, Tussman wrote about the fragmentation of the efforts of professors and students, concluding that “the effect is that no teacher is in a position to be responsible for, or effectively concerned with, the student’s total educational situation. The student presents himself to the teacher in fragments, and not even the advising system can put him together again” (Tussman, 1969, p. 6). He goes on to advocate for a two-year lower division educational program with a comprehensive, interdisciplinary scope and interrelated responsibilities for teachers. The Experimental Program stood somewhat outside the rest of the university and lasted for three years, but like its predecessor the Experimental College, its restructuring and integration of courses within and

across semesters sought to bring community and coherence to the experiences of students and faculty in much the same way as current LCs.

There is more to the history and development of LCs, and much of it is captured in *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education* (Smith and others, 2004). To paraphrase a summary of these reforms and the educational theories they embrace, “Learning communities are the pedagogical embodiment of the belief that teaching and learning are relational processes, involving co-creating knowledge through relationships among students, between students and teachers, and through the environment in which these relationships operate” (Price, 2005, p. 6).

The Current State of Learning Communities

LCs are found at all types of colleges and universities, and at all levels of courses, from developmental to graduate. Learning community growth has increased steadily since their adoption in the early 1970s by a few colleges and universities—SUNY Stony Brook (New York), LaGuardia Community College (New York), and the Evergreen State College (Washington), among the earliest—to their presence at more than 800 colleges and universities (Smith and MacGregor, 2009, p. 120). According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), in 2002, 30 percent of first-year students and 23 percent of seniors at four-year colleges or universities participating in the survey were in an LC or planned to be in one (Zhao and Kuh, 2004, p. 120). Students were evenly represented at public and private institutions (Zhao and Kuh, 2004, p. 122). The Policy Center on the First Year of College reported that approximately 62 percent of colleges enrolled at least some first-year students into learning communities; LCs were most common at research-extensive universities (present at 82 percent) and least common at small baccalaureate colleges (present at 46 percent) (Barefoot, 2002). Of the 298 colleges and universities listed in the LC directory on the National Learning Commons website, approximately 39 percent are community colleges and 61 percent are baccalaureate-degree (or higher degree) granting institutions (“National Learning Communities Directory Search,” n.d.).

The Impact of Learning Communities

LCs have grown rapidly, and anecdotal reports attest to their popularity, but what research demonstrates their effectiveness? This section reviews literature on the impact of LCs, highlighting a sample of single-institution studies and describing results from multi-institutional studies. For a comprehensive review of LC research prior to 2003, see the monograph *Learning Community Research and Assessment: What We Know Now* (Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, and Lindblad, 2003). As with LCs themselves, the reports reviewed varied substantially, examining outcomes such as grades,

course completion, students' perceptions of their experiences, retention in college, and graduation. Information is included from journal articles, dissertations, unpublished reports, conference presentations, and granting agency reports. Although it was difficult to compare directly such varied data, the researchers concluded that "those studies that looked at retention, academic success, and satisfaction reported overwhelmingly positive results. These findings held without regard to the size of the study or the type of the learning community undertaken, suggesting that even modest learning community initiatives are likely to reap positive outcomes" (Taylor and others, 2003, p. 19).

The *Journal of Learning Community Research*, first published in 2006, has added to the number of studies available about LCs (rather than relying on campus reports or conference presentations). Articles include research reports, case studies, descriptions of program implementation and revision, and book reviews. A number of studies have examined LCs in specific courses or disciplines. For example, faculty at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who implemented and assessed LCs for first-year psychology majors over four years found that students in the LC achieved the program goals at significantly higher rates than their non-LC peers (Buch and Spaulding, 2008). Specifically, small cohorts of students in the LC taking courses together with advising by one of the LC faculty achieved higher grade point averages (GPAs) and one-year retention rates than the non-LC control group, which was matched statistically for ethnicity, SAT scores, and predicted GPA. In addition, students in the LC made more timely progress toward degree and more timely completion of an upper-level research methods course that is a gateway course for other upper-level major courses. Assessment of student achievement and other program goals continued beyond the year that the students were in the LC, demonstrating more than a one-semester or one-year impact of the LC.

Students at Dickinson College were surveyed and participated in focus groups for four years to assess the impact of LCs on students' engaged learning, civic development, and well-being (Finley, 2009). LCs at Dickinson involved a first-year seminar in which the faculty member was the advisor for the students in the course, and the course included required out-of-class experiences (assorted meals, attendance at guest lectures, events, and so on). Students who were not in an LC took a first-year seminar without the related advising and cocurricular components. "Overall, the trend effect . . . suggests that LC students are learning in different ways and engaging in ostensibly deeper levels than students in stand-alone seminars" (Finley, 2009, p. 5). The factors associated with this trend were described by students and included the importance of reflection on the outside experiences, and active participation in experiences that allowed students to apply what they were learning in the classroom. Students in stand-alone seminars talked about engagement in the course being related to the performance of the seminar instructor, their own interest in the

course, or seeing the course as a requirement to fulfill. Results related to student well-being showed significantly lower levels of alcohol consumption among students who had been in an LC; these lower levels were consistent across the four years. “The qualitative data suggest this finding may be an artifact of the social climate created by LCs,” as students discussed their ability to strike up conversations with others more easily if they had something in common (the course, the topic, the out-of-class experience) to get them started (Finley, 2009, p. 11). Another result related to well-being that echoes the comments about alcohol use was “the positive development of social relationships. Students’ connections with peers and faculty were clearly a defining, satisfying, and meaningful element of this [LC] experience” (Finley, 2009, p. 17). The research documented outcomes that were sustained beyond the first year and it controlled for selection effects, two important contributions to the literature of LCs.

Faculty at Stony Brook University (SUNY) used a quasi-experimental design to examine student performance in general chemistry courses (Hanson and Heller, 2009). Students were not randomly assigned to the courses, but the only statistically difference among the three groups was their achievement in math; one group was taking calculus and two groups were taking precalculus. Of the two groups taking precalculus, one group took their courses in an LC comprised of chemistry, precalculus, writing, and a four-credit integrative seminar, with the instructor also being the academic advisor for the LC students. Student success was measured by achievement in weekly recitation sections, weekly quizzes, course exams, and overall course grade. Across all measures, the students in the LC performed as well as or better than the students in the calculus group, and far better than the students in the other precalculus group. The authors concluded that “four principal factors can be identified for the success of students in a learning community: peer support, peer assessment, group confidence, and the learning environment” (Hanson and Heller, 2009, p. 23).

Although some research focuses on the outcomes related to different types of courses offered in LCs, other studies examine impacts on different types of students. Huerta and Bray (2008) studied LCs for first-year students at a designated Title V Hispanic-Serving Institution, looking specifically for pedagogical components of the LCs that were particularly beneficial (if they were beneficial at all) to students. They found that collaborative learning strategies were the most beneficial classroom experience for all students and that Latino students were more likely to report experiencing collaborative learning than non-Hispanic whites. The presence of collaborative learning in LCs predicted higher GPAs for students, and was associated with retention rates that were similar for Latino and non-Hispanic whites.

The results reported by Huerta and Bray (2008) were reinforced by the results of a large-scale study of LCs at four large public urban institutions

that serve large numbers of underprepared students (Engstrom, 2008). Interviews were conducted with students in basic-skills LCs, and a portion of the interviews was directed toward faculty contributions to students' learning. The findings of the study "argue that faculty teaching practices created trusting, safe learning environments that promoted student persistence and success" (Engstrom, 2008, p. 8). One of the institutions reported that participation in LCs resulted in a 20–50 percent increase in student retention and success, sustained progress toward degree, and strong growth in academic and critical-thinking skills ("De Anza College: Learning in Communities: Do Learning Communities Work?," n.d.). Another institution reported higher retention rates for English as a second language (ESL) students in LCs compared with ESL students not in LCs (although not consistently higher) and substantially higher pass rates (24 percent higher one year, 33 percent higher another year) in a college-level English course for ESL students taking the course in an LC format (van Slyck, 2003). Faculty teaching practices that fostered these successes were active learning pedagogies, faculty collaboration and an integrative curriculum, development of college learning strategies, and student validation (Engstrom, 2008, p. 9). These types of teaching practices are consistent with earlier reports and calls for reform and are broadly applicable to students taking developmental and college-level courses—they enhance students' active engagement with a variety of learning processes. An example of "development of college learning strategies" was that faculty did not just tell students to form study groups and meet outside of class time, but faculty "took an active role in teaching [students] how to set up and facilitate these forums. . . . Students did not leave the class until they had their group and had set aside time to meet. . . . Faculty also used class time to encourage students to use tutors and other campus supports" (Engstrom, 2008, p. 15). These teaching practices conveyed the message to students that study groups, use of tutors, and other academic support services or activities were expected, integral parts of the course experience and not just extra work for students in trouble.

In an effort to harness the beneficial effects of LCs and service learning, some institutions combine the two, including service learning as a component of an LC. The merits of service learning are similar to those of LCs; "emerging research on service-learning validates a longstanding philosophy: integrating academics and community service delivers greater student leadership development, enriched learning, and improved academic performance" (Simonet, 2008, p. 1). Research at a midsized public research university showed that for first-time, first-year students, involvement in service learning as a part of a course increased their levels of academic and social integration (social integration with peers and with faculty) but showed significant increases in student retention only for first-time, first-year women over a two-year period (first-year to junior year) (Wolff and Tinney, 2006).

Results of student surveys at Wagner College have shown high levels of student satisfaction with LCs and with the experiential learning component of the First-Year Program (Barchitta and Eshelman, 2003). The fact that all students participate in LCs makes comparisons difficult, but from the first year to the third year of the Wagner Plan significant increases were seen in students' agreement or strong agreement with statements about the LCs such as active participation, feeling connected to students, opportunities to connect with faculty, and being challenged to improve reading, writing, and speaking skills. Commuter students reported significantly higher feelings of being connected to other students and to the campus. These higher levels were sustained after the third year of the program. Similarly, students showed significant increases in levels of agreement about the meaning of the experiential learning component of the LC, agreeing that the experiential learning made the classes meaningful, improved problem-solving skills, and increased understanding of civic responsibility.

Since the inception of the Wagner Plan, enrollments have increased with more geographic and ethnic diversity, more students living on campus, higher high school GPA and SAT scores, and higher retention rates. Faculty teaching load has been reduced but advising loads have increased, especially for the faculty teaching in the FYP. These successes have come with their own set of challenges, as facilities were stretched to and beyond capacity, including classrooms, residence halls, dining facilities, and parking lots. Retention rates hit a high in 2005 and have moderated since then, coinciding with facilities' constraints and then the economic recession. All of this is to suggest some of the institutional impacts of a successful LC program. Wagner students experienced increases in engagement and achievement, and the institution learned lessons about what it takes to sustain such momentum (Guarasci, 2006). See Chapter Three of this volume for an intradisciplinary example of the Wagner Plan in action.

Not all research on LCs shows positive results. A study of students in public speaking classes examined the relationships among social support, audience familiarity, and speaking anxiety, and the impact of LCs on those factors (Holler and Kinnick, 2008). Students in public speaking courses that were a part of an LC or were stand-alone courses were surveyed at the beginning and end of the semester. Although students in the LCs reported reduced anxiety at the end of the semester, students in the stand-alone courses reported greater reductions of anxiety. Students in the LCs reported a greater degree of comfort in giving a speech, and they were more likely to say that the other students were friends. They also were more likely to say that their audience (fellow students) was a source of anxiety than students in the stand-alone courses. The researchers speculated that the increased levels of social support and audience familiarity that were made possible by the LC format also contributed to the higher levels of anxiety; perhaps the students in the LCs were more concerned about impressing friends with whom they would continue to interact.

Recently, the National Center for Postsecondary Research and MDRC (formerly the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, a research organization that focuses on the well-being of low-income people) undertook research examining community college students in LCs. Citing community colleges as institutions serving students most in need of high-impact educational practices and other support mechanisms and noting the need for a more comprehensive experimental-design research study of LCs, the researchers worked with faculty at Kingsborough Community College, and currently are in the midst of a larger study involving six community colleges, the “Learning Communities Demonstration” (Visser, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, and Schneider, 2008).

At Kingsborough, students in their first semester were placed randomly into an LC linking three courses and providing enhanced counseling and tutoring (the experimental group) or into the same courses that were not linked (the control group). Results after two years showed that students in the experimental group felt more integrated and engaged in the college, earned more credits during their first semester, and were more likely to take and pass the required English skills assessment test (Scrivener and others, 2008). Although students in the experimental group persisted at slightly higher rates than students in the control group, the difference was not statistically significant until the end of the fourth semester (three semesters after the end of the LC) (Scrivener and others, 2008, p. 61). This result emphasizes the need for assessment beyond the initial intervention, as it suggests that LCs (and other high-impact educational practices) may have an impact that accumulates over time or that takes time to become apparent.

The Learning Communities Demonstration builds upon the research and practice at Kingsborough Community College, studying six models of LCs at six community colleges (Kingsborough is one of the six, continuing the work there), and looking at design and operation of LCs, effects on student achievement, and comparative program costs. A report of the demonstration project notes that “student cohorts led to strong relationships among students, leading to both personal and academic support networks” (Visser, Schneider, Wathington, and Collado, 2010). Much of this report addresses issues related to implementation of LCs at these colleges and the associated challenges of “scaling up” from pilot programs to programs that enroll large numbers of students and require significant institutional commitment in the form of faculty and staff time and other resources. The lessons learned are applicable across many different types of higher education institutions.

Conclusion

LCs have been a growing movement aimed at educational reform for decades, and evidence continues to mount documenting successes they

have achieved. Students and faculty report positive outcomes as a result of enhanced engagement with each other and the integration of ideas and experiences. At an institutional level, faculty and administrators report new partnerships, new programs, and invigorated departments as a result of LC implementation and development. Professional development for faculty and administrators is essential to the sustainability of these reform efforts (Guarasci, 2006; Levine Laufgraben and Shapiro, 2004; Smith and others, 2004). The resources listed in the Appendix are excellent opportunities for professional development, as they variously connect individuals and teams with experienced LC practitioners.

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ANNE GOODSELL LOVE is associate provost for assessment at Wagner College, coordinating collegewide assessment efforts. In addition, she has been codirector of the Atlantic Center for Learning Communities, a regional leadership network dedicated to supporting colleges and universities in their development of learning communities and other learner-centered pedagogies.