Learning Communities and Collaboration

Barbara D. Jackson, Guest Editor

Collectively the essays in this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* represent the current state of the art of one of the most significant movements in contemporary higher education. They address both "why we do" and "how to do" learning communities. All are revisions of works originally presented at either the 2003 or 2004 *Learning Communities and Collaboration* conference. This event is convened annually by a consortium of Midwestern urban colleges and universities. Delta Community College, Harper Community College, the Metropolitan Community Colleges of Kansas City, and Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis each have developed strong learning communities programs in response to the particular needs of their students and local communities. Support for the consortium has been provided by the Washington Center, especially from Jean MacGregor. In the eight years it has been convened, *Learning Communities and Collaboration* has developed a national audience of practitioners who gather to share their research and best practices.

It is neither coincidental nor trivial that the annual conference and this issue share "collaboration" as an overarching theme. An essential foundational element of learning communities in higher education is the formation of social and intellectual partnerships that span across disciplines, across campus, and between campus and community.

The variety in genres, styles, and perspectives of these pieces present an accurate reflection of the mosaic that the community of practice centered on learning communities has become. Learning communities practitioners include faculty from many disciplines and all academic ranks. They include librarians, administrators, advisors, staff, and student mentors, as well. They also represent the spectrum of higher education: research universities, private elite colleges, community colleges, and residential public and commuter urban universities.

The authors mirror this diversity, representing faculty from disciplines of history, psychology, education, English, political science, and anthropology. They include two university vice-presidents, campus learning community directors, and an assessment professional. Their topics reflect the range of opportunities and challenges faced by institutions and individuals who develop them.

Mahoney and Flynn get us started with "An Introduction to Learning Communities," a concise yet comprehensive primer on learning communities that reprises a workshop designed for newcomers. They describe the generic learning community components as "… a variety of approaches that link or cluster classes during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, that enroll a common cohort of students" (p. 12).

From this, they explore the wide range of variations on this theme that have been developed to meet specific institutional needs, especially for urban and suburban metropolitan universities (p. 11). Readers are directed to the most current significant resources on learning communities, including the Washington Center's Web site; Levine and Shapiro's *Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities*; and the recently published retrospective *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education*, edited by the founders of the contemporary movement, Barbara Leigh Smith, Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Faith Gabelnick.

It is not lightly that I claim learning communities to be one of the most significant developments in contemporary higher education. As Mahoney and Flynn state, "The transformation to near-universal higher education in the second half of the twentieth century ... has created a need for new ways of engaging students" (p. 10). Oates and O'Connor go on to demonstrate how learning communities respond to research on cognitive development conclusions regarding the importance of engaged and active learning as well as the growing demands for a socially and economically relevant higher education curriculum (p. 25).

Learning Communities have become one of the best ways institutions can respond to the current challenges faced by these new expectations of higher education. According to Matthews, they have proven to be one of the most effective ways of addressing the heterogeneity of today's students in terms of ethnic and social diversity as well as levels of academic preparation. "(L)earning communities combine skills courses with each other or skills courses with college content courses... address poor preparation... (and) give beginning students the tools to succeed so that access is not a revolving door" (p. 43). She also argues that they represent unique opportunities to meet our institutions' responsibility to educate for citizenship (p. 42).

Learning communities have been enthusiastically embraced by so many institutions because of the empirically demonstrated outcomes related to the growth of student intellectual and social development that they foster. Hansen and Williams demonstrate the importance of an intentional assessment plan for learning communities to insure responsiveness to student learning needs and continuous programmatic improvement. Learning communities by design encourage students to address complex social questions from multiple perspectives and to become more active, sophisticated, and critical thinkers than in the traditional single-discipline format. As Lee Williams argues, they produce "fourth-order thinking" (p. 6). Unlike the passive rote-learning characteristic of too many introductory discipline courses, learning communities often result in students who are intellectual risk-takers. Learning communities provide a collegiate venue for students to collaborate productively, especially with those of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. All of these represent skills highly valued, if not required, by the contemporary workplace.

Boyd documents how learning communities can have a positive impact on trans-forming the way faculty approach students and teaching. By tangibly demonstrating the powerful synergy of a community of learners, faculty are encouraged to move

beyond the traditional model that bifurcates the roles of teacher/learner or expert/client. In Lee Williams' view, learning communities represent an antidote for the pervasive cynicism that has come to characterize higher education (p. 50).

Learning communities are such powerful agents in the higher education learning process because they embody some special characteristics. They represent, for example, one of the few opportunities undergraduates especially beginning students have to engage in comprehensive, engaged, deep learning. And, as Oates and O'Connor demonstrate, real world, community connections often inform the curriculum. They provide the learning structure and communal face to take on large public concerns (p. 32). In learning communities, however, the learning process (e.g., of collaboration, responsibility, initiative) is often as important to student development as learning specific disciplinary content. In the best of models students learn the process of collaborative work with peers, faculty, and community entities. They develop the ability to embrace (not fear) ideas that are different from their own. As Lee Burdette Williams (p. 54) so eloquently documents, this is possible because learning communities are places where trust is engendered. Perhaps the most essential and powerful aspect of learning communities is the ability to create community, where students are seen holistically as learners, citizens, and complex persons. As she (p. 57) illustrates, they are perhaps our best strategy for addressing concerns about the lack of student motivation.

If you are in a position to initiate or enhance learning communities on your campus, the articles in this issue contain much in the way of advice and guidance based on considerable cross-institutional experience and assessment. Some strategies to consider include the following:

One size fits none   Mahoney and Flynn (p. 12) describe the major general rubrics for learning communities structures that have proven effective, but note that there is an almost infinite number of ways to develop new learning communities approaches appropriate to particular institutional environments.

Comprehensive assessment is key   Matthews (p. 44) cites the strong and mutually supportive relationship between the assessment and learning communities movements. Hansen and Williams provide a model for developing a comprehensive assessment plan, which addresses needs, process, and outcomes and utilizes qualitative and quantitative methodologies. They demonstrate how this has been key to tailoring learning communities to the special needs of an urban campus environment.

Move teaching beyond the classroom   Matthews and especially Oates and O'Connor strongly encourage innovation and the search for new connections between institutions and surrounding communities (see Oates and O'Connor). The latter demonstrate how strategic partnerships with the community foster stronger learning communities and provide even more significant experiences for students than traditional service learning models. They urge creativity in placing curriculum and pedagogy in a larger

community context so that the community becomes the center of learning versus community as a target for the application of academic knowledge (p. 26).

Nurture a community of practice within your campus Administrators are encouraged to support the establishment and maintenance of connections among those involved in learning communities. Boyd discusses the importance for faculty development of addressing rewards, noting that issues of collegiality, recognition, and a more positive relationship with students are as important as tangible or monetary ones. Mahoney and Flynn (p. 10) and Hansen and Williams (p. 69) cite the formation of instructional teams that crosscut academic roles as an effective professional development practice. Oates and O'Connor (p. 25) conclude that the learning community itself can become a community of practice.

Articles were selected for inclusion in this issue to inspire and inform a wide range of metropolitan university campus leaders, including newcomers and learning communities veterans. To the former, the articles should provide a rationale as well as directions to strategies and resources for new program development. For leaders of established programs, the authors offer ideas and encouragement for enhancement and expansion, particularly emphasizing the importance of an inclusive assessment plan.

Our goals have been similar to those of Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) as stated by Roberta Matthews in her closing remarks to the Learning Communities and Collaboration 2003 conference: We "…have tried to give our readers some sense of the richness of what is happening out there…. These cost-efficient and learning efficient frameworks for better teaching and learning are everywhere. Some are better planned than others, some better financed, some better executed, but virtually all have champions who 'get it' and are striving to get it even better…." The other authors of this issue join Matthews in hoping that you are "…inspired by what you have learned here and energized to continue to do the good work we all need to do" (p. 48).

References

Levine Laufgraben, J., and N. Shapiro, *Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities* (The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series) (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Smith, B. L., J. MacGregor, R.S. Matthews and F. Gabelnick, F., *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Washington Center Web site http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu.

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