

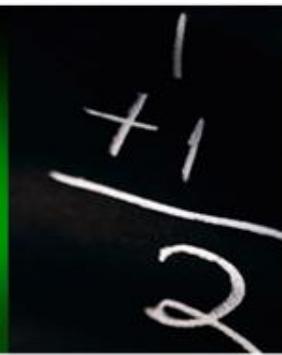
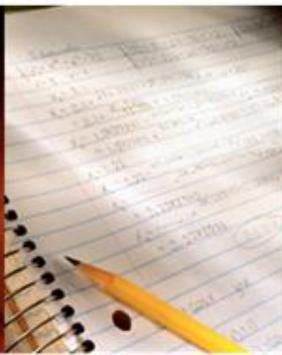


The Use of Learning Communities to Improve Student Learning and Success

Strategies, Tactics, & Assessments

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INTRODUCTION TO LEARNING COMMUNITIES (LC)

During the last two decades, higher education has focused on providing learning environments conducive to students participating in their own learning.

Institutions have tried to find ways for students to actively participate with faculty members and to encourage them to build a support network, form friendships and connect with their institutions.

Learning communities, in their various forms, have assisted higher education in providing these experiences.



HISTORY OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The origin of learning communities dates back to 1927 when Alexander Meiklejohn formed the two-year Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (Powell, 1981).

- Meiklejohn believed that undergraduate college must teach students how to think, and he aspired to make students into “thinking, caring, active citizens with the intellectual skills to participate in a democratic society.”
 - Students and faculty read and discussed classic Greek literature the first year and compared it to the contemporary American literature in the second-year.
 - Students were required to connect these ideas and write a paper during the summer between the first and second years.

Although this first attempt at a learning community was short-lived--only six years--it provided the foundation for the learning communities we know today.





LCs AND THE CURRICULUM

Although learning communities in their basic form have existed in one form or another for over seventy years, their recent resurgence has expanded to include many different models.

Learning communities intentionally restructure the curriculum to connect students and faculty in common courses, often including seminars or a peer advising component.





Learning Communities Today

- Utilizing LCs to address a variety of educational issues:
 - The mismatched expectations of career-oriented students and research- and discipline-oriented faculty
 - The inadequate amount of intellectual interaction between students and between faculty and students
 - The lack of coherence among most of the courses taken by students outside of their major
 - Inadequate resources and opportunities for faculty development
 - The growing complexity and interdependence of contemporary issues

Hill, 1985



Learning Communities Impact

- Significant impact on the academic success of disadvantaged students, students of color, academically underprepared students, students needing remedial support, and non-traditional students.



WHAT IS A LEARNING COMMUNITY?

- According to Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990, p. 19),
 - **"A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses--or actually restructure the curricular 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."**

Building Community Among Students

Building Community Between Students and Faculty

Building Community Among Faculty



Intentional restructuring of students' **time**, **credit**, and **learning experiences** to build community among students and their teachers and among disciplines (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2001)



Linking Academic Work

- Learning communities help students link their academic work with active and increased intellectual interaction with each other and with faculty.
- Learning communities also promote coherence among students and create a sense of common purpose and community.
- Learning communities have been shown to increase student retention and academic achievement, increase student involvement and motivation, improve students time to degree completion, and enhance student intellectual development.





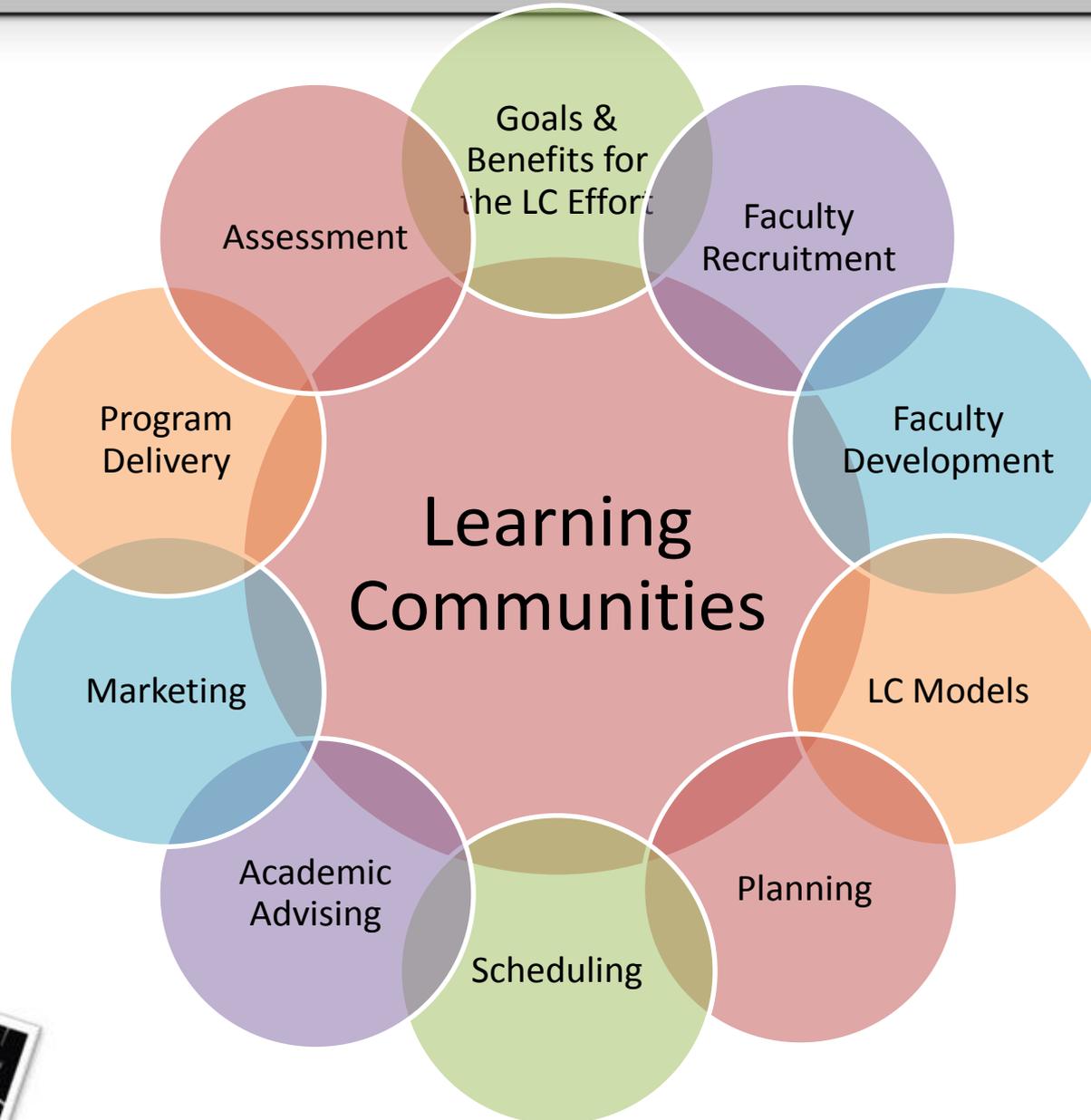
Learning Communities Defined

- Alexander Astin (1985, p. 161) in Schroeder & Mable (1994, p. 167) defines learning communities as **"small subgroups of students. . .characterized by a common sense of purpose. . .that can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness that encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences."**





Locus of Leadership



Basic Characteristics

- 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



Critical Elements for Learning Community Initiatives

- An impetus for change
- Administrative support
- Leadership team that includes academic affairs and student life
- Shared vision
- Strategic planning and annual planning
- Inclusive planning
- Student focused goals
- Faculty involvement
- Evaluation and assessment plan
- Budget
- Incentives and Rewards



Cross-unit Leadership and Collaboration

- Faculty Leadership
- Student Life Administrative Leadership/Residence Life
- Academic Affairs Administrative Leadership
- Admissions and Orientation
- Registrar
- Assessment/IR
- Students





- LCs foster learning to learn as a social act.
 - Students involved in learning communities will bring the confidence and social energy fostered by membership in the community into the classroom.
 - Faculty members will find incorporating that sense of membership into their teaching much more productive





Learning Community Models

There are several **major learning community models** in existence.

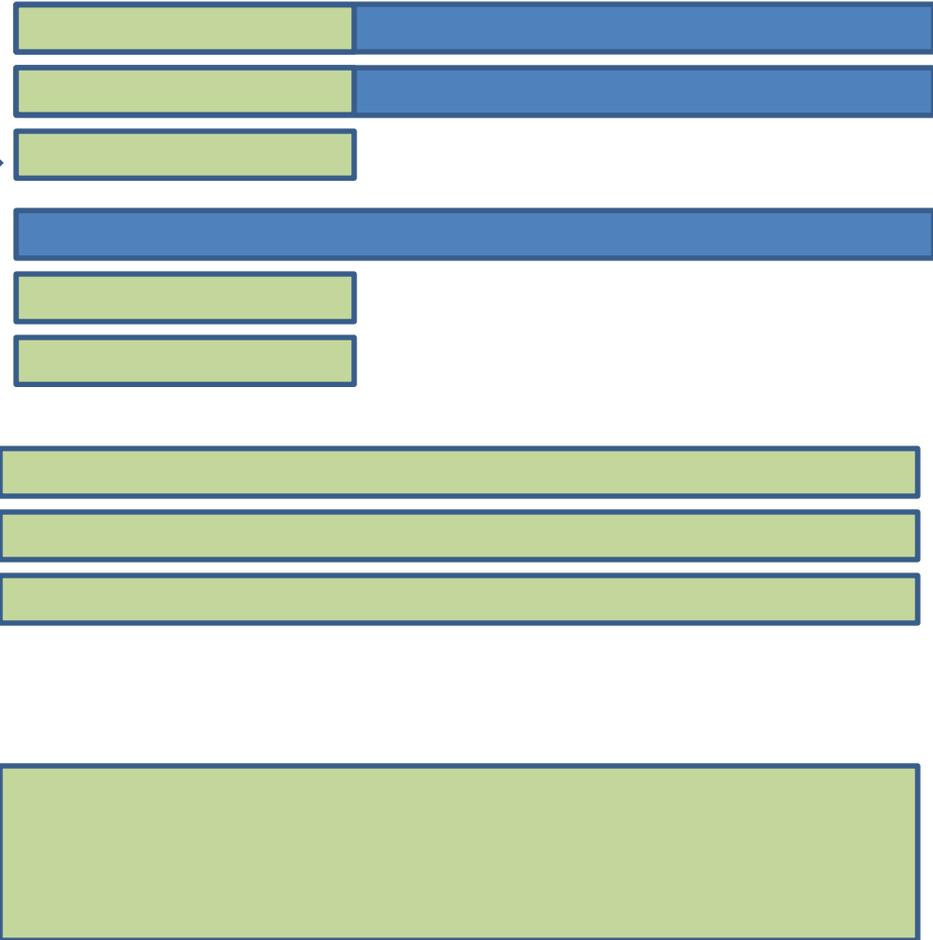
Many institutions find that choosing a single model is not as beneficial as **using bits and pieces from two or three models.**

Each institution has its own **mission and culture** and can design the learning communities that best fit that mission and culture.



Structure of Learning Communities

- Programs in which a small cohort of students enrolls in larger classes that faculty DO NOT coordinate. Intellectual connections and community-building often take place in an additional integrative seminar.
- Programs of two or more classes linked thematically or by content, which a cohort of students take together. The faculty DO plan the program collaboratively.
- Programs of coursework that faculty members team-teach. The coursework is embedded in an integrated program of study.



Six Commonly Described Models

- I. Linked, paired or clustered courses
- II. “Learning” or “Themed” clusters (Team-Taught/Coordinated Studies)
- III. FIGS (freshmen interest groups) – Cohorts in large groups
- IV. Federated Learning Communities
- V. Developmental Clusters
- VI. Residence-based programs intentionally linking the classroom to the residential life experience





I. "Linked, Paired, Clustered Courses"

- This model links a cohort of students with two or more common courses.
- One course is typically content-based (science, math) and the other is an application course (writing, speech). A third can be a first seminar course.
- The faculty of each course may teach independently or together and coordinate syllabi and assignments so that the classes compliment each other.
- The Linked Courses Model provides a shared experience for students that focuses on a content-based course that is actively supported by a skills course.





Linked, Paired, Clusters Courses – University of Washington

- The **University of Washington** has a nationally recognized Interdisciplinary Writing Program in which students take an expository writing course that is linked with a general education lecture course.
- Students can choose up to 27 different general education courses. Instructors work together to generate ideas for assignments in the writing class based on the general education course.
- The community is formed in the small writing classes and students share a common identity and purpose while in the general education course.





Linked, Paired, Clusters Courses – Long Beach City College

- Long Beach City College – “Students and Teachers Achieving Results” (STAR)
- Designed to intensely develop reading, writing, math, study, and college survival skills for underrepresented and at-risk students.
- Register for a cohort of classes in which the curriculum is integrated. Faculty teaching the courses meet regularly to monitor student progress and modify the curriculum to help students meet academic and personal goals.
- Cooperative learning, communication skills, and development of self-esteem are emphasized.





II. "Learning" Clusters or "Themed"

- The Learning Cluster Model is similar to the Linked Course Model except that instead of linking two courses together, three or four courses are linked with one cohort, often serving as the students' entire course load.
 - However, in Learning Clusters, the courses are usually based on a theme, historical periods, issues, or problems.
- The degree to which the three or four faculty work together depends on the institution but can vary from common syllabi, joint assignments to team teaching.
 - Often, Learning Clusters have a seminar component in which the students meet weekly or bi-weekly to discuss class work and shared experiences. Students in Learning Clusters may also have planned social events, field trips, or common readings.





Also known as “Coordinated Studies”

- Coordinated studies programs can enroll a cohort of students in 15-18 credits organized around an interdisciplinary theme.
- Faculty and students participate in full-time active learning based on an interdisciplinary theme.
- This curriculum can last an entire year and the faculty have the opportunity to redesign the entire curriculum, providing extensive professional development for faculty.
- These Learning Communities are thematic and can be broad or narrow in scope.
- Most extensive approach in terms of curricular integration and faculty involvement.
- Scheduling of class time becomes quite flexible: opportunities for BLOCKS of time for lectures, discussions, field trips, and workshops.
- Frequent use of “book seminars,” collaborative learning, and student projects.



Coordinated or Themed Model

Evergreen State College

- Themes such as:
 - Quests (credit is given for anthropology and developmental writing);
 - Reflections of Nature (credit is received in the visual arts, physics, biology, literature and computer science); and
 - Science Shakes the Foundations: Dickens, Darwin, Marx, and You (classes in English composition, physical anthropology, the history of science and economics are given credits in this track).





Coordinated or Themed Model Seattle Central Community College

- Full-time active learning based on an interdisciplinary theme
- Opportunity for redesigning the curriculum
- Extensive professional development for faculty
- Tinto, 1997 study – Longitudinal panel study (quantitative) and qualitative case study





Coordinated or Themed Model

George Mason University

- Enroll in a 32-credit freshman learning community experience consisting of four 8-credit integrated community:
 - Community of Learners
 - The Natural World
 - The Social World
 - Self as a Citizen

The communities are taken sequentially and fulfill most of the university's general education requirements.

They are team-taught by two or more faculty representing different disciplinary perspectives.



“Learning” Clusters – Western Michigan

- The Honors College Program has at least four Learning Clusters each semester.
- Some examples have included:
 - Human Nature (Introduction to Biomedical Sciences, Thought and Writing, and General Psychology);
 - Thought and Politics (Thought and Writing, Principles of Sociology, and Introduction to Political Science); and
 - Information Processing (Informational Writing, Finite Mathematics with Applications, and Principles of Sociology).



Themed Clusters – LaGuardia CC

- Liberal arts and science majors can choose from a list of six to eight cluster offers each semester.
- Each cluster is organized around a curricular theme and includes two liberal arts and science course, college composition, a research paper course, and an integrated hour.
 - Harlem on My Mind: American Music, The Art of Theatre, English Composition, The Research Paper, Integrated Hour.
 - Names, Labels, and Stereotypes: Oral Communication, Critical Thinking, English Composition, The Research Paper, Integrated Hour.
 - Women’s Lives: Women’s Struggles, Introduction to Sociology, Women and Society, English Composition, The Research Paper, Integrated Hour.





III. "Freshman Interest Groups" (FIGs)

- The Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) are similar to Linked Courses in that they link three freshmen courses together by theme; this is especially suited for large universities because many FIGs can be offered simultaneously.
 - FIGs are linked around academic majors and include a peer advising component where freshman can discuss course work and problems adjusting to college in a smaller weekly seminar.
 - Because of the weekly seminars, led by a peer advisor, faculty play a lesser role, but may be active in the FIGs by attending social events or the occasional weekly seminar.



Examples of F.I.G.'s



- The American State
 - Introduction to Politics
 - Survey – U.S. History
 - Writing
 - F.I.G. Discussion Group
- Pre-Engineering
 - Analytic Geometry
 - General Chemistry
 - Composition
 - Engineering Careers
 - F.I.G. Discussion Group





FIGS – University of Oregon

- Originated the FIG model out of need for academic advising assistance and building a community among freshmen in each major.
- Courses selected for FIGs are often foundation courses for a major and a smaller writing or communications course.
- Students are invited to join a FIG the summer before they start college.
- Some FIGs at the University of Oregon include:
 - Pre-Law (American Government, Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics and Fundamentals of Public Speaking);
 - Journalism-Communications: (Comparative Literature, Technology and Society, and Fundamentals of Speech Communication);
 - Art and Architecture (Survey of the Visual Arts, Landscape, Environment and Culture, and English Composition); and
 - Pre-Health Sciences (Biology lecture and lab, Psychology, and English Composition).



FIGS – University of Missouri-Columbia

- Between 10-15 students enroll in a FIG, who live together on the same floor in a residence hall and are co-enrolled in three courses during the fall semester.





FIGS – University of Washington

- Enrolls nearly 75% of its entering freshman in FIGS each autumn quarter.
- Organizes around curricular interests and themes.
- Students interested in “the natural world” can select from a list of FIGs that include courses from a variety of natural science, humanities, and/or social science disciplines.





IV. "Federated Learning Communities"

- This model is the most complex Learning Community Model because a cohort of students takes three theme-based courses in addition to a three credit seminar taught by a Master Learner.
 - The Master Learner is a professor from a different discipline who takes the courses and fulfills all the requirements of the classes along with the students.
 - He or she then leads the seminar and assists students in synthesizing and exploring the opinions and points of view of students from the three courses.
 - Faculty in Federated Learning Communities are relieved of their other teaching responsibilities.



- Upper level students majoring in psychology or biology that includes courses titled General Genetics, The Healer and the Witch in History, Philosophy and Medicine and a three-credit seminar, Social and Ethical Issues in the Life Sciences.





V. Developmental Studies Clusters

- Used as an approach to better support the academic needs of students who enter college with deficiencies in one or more basic skill areas.
- Often link a remedial/developmental course with a general education or discipline-based courses.
- Coordinate academic support services around community
- Often includes a freshman seminar
- EX: LaGuardia CC (reading, writing, speech)





VI. Residence-Based LC Programs

- Adopt a particular curricular model to include a residential component.
 - Curricular component resembles one of the other LC approaches
 - Involve more than assigning students with similar majors to the same floor of a residence hall
 - Student cohorts enroll in specified curricular offerings and reside together in dedicated living space
 - Designed to integrate curricular and co-curricular experiences
 - Require change within multiple university systems: curriculum, teaching, and housing
 - Academic and co-curricular community activities are scheduled in residence halls and in many instances classes actually meet in classrooms located in residential spaces.





Residence-Based Programs

University of Michigan

- Community Scholars Program
- Integrates community service-learning and intercultural understanding and dialogue in a residential learning community.
 - Student in the University (3)
 - English/Math
 - Leadership opportunities, co-curricular activities, tutoring and study groups.



Benefits of Learning Communities

- The benefits of learning communities to students are numerous but extend beyond students to faculty and the entire institution.
- Students involved in learning communities show an increase in academic achievement, retention, motivation, intellectual development, learning, and involvement and community.
- Learning communities also reinforce positive views of the institution.



Specific Program Goals

- Optimizing the academic and social experience for students.
 - Increase student learning and achievement
 - Increase time on task both in and out of the class
 - Promote active learning and teamwork skills
 - Develop student leadership
 - Increase the success rate for under-represented students
 - Increase entry and completion in certain majors
 - Improve retention





Benefits for Faculty

- Faculty that teach in learning communities reveal that they become re-energized and feel empowered.
 - They feel as if their opinions are valued; and the rich teaching experience allows them to be creative and increases their commitment to the institution.
 - Institutions report that learning communities draw diverse elements together toward a common goal, which improves the overall campus climate.



Common Assessment Measures

- Academic Achievement
 - GPA
 - Credits Attempted/Earned
 - Course Withdrawals
- Persistence
- Qualitative
 - Building support peer groups
 - Shared learning-bridging the academic/social divide
- Academic and Social Integration Survey
- Institutional Commitment
- Higher Education Commitment
- Campus Involvement
- Student Engagement
- Interaction with Faculty & Peers
- View of College
- Time to Degree



Evidence of Program Achievement

- National Learning Communities Project
 - 86% assess the effectiveness of their LCs through student satisfaction
 - 65% assess faculty/student affairs satisfaction
 - 72% analyze year to year retention
 - 69% assess retention within a program

<http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=73>





Creating Learning Communities

- Conditions need to be present to successfully build and sustain learning communities
 - Clearly defined and articulated program goals
 - Dedicated resources
 - Committed program leadership and a broadening pool of participants and stakeholders
 - Credible evidence of program impact and achievement
 - Mechanisms for ongoing improvement and change
 - Hug your Register and IR personnel



Selecting an Approach

- Consider campus' organization and culture
 - Faculty and Staff
 - Collaborations and Partnerships
 - Interdisciplinary Approaches Already in Existence?
- No one model or approach is “better” than another.
- Each has varying degrees of faculty engagement and curricular integration





Identify Goals for a Learning Community Initiative

- for specific areas of need
- students
- for faculty
- for the curriculum
- for student life initiatives
- for the institutional mission and location



for specific areas of need...

- First term in college adjustment needs and developmental opportunities
- High-risk courses
- Gateway courses/Pre-requisites
- Critical distribution courses
- Platform courses for specific majors
- Courses that are or could be arenas for bridging skills/content, theory/practice, liberal arts/professions
- Across-curriculum initiatives





For students...

- Better connections with classmates
- Increased interaction between faculty and students
- Increased understanding of the connections between disciplines
- Stronger connections between courses and learning
- Greater course satisfaction
- Improved student engagement and involvement on the campus
- Increased satisfaction with the college experience





for faculty...

- Increase experimentation within the curriculum
- Broaden pedagogical repertoire of faculty
- Increase faculty engagement with one another
- Promote deeper interaction among faculty and students
- Promote interaction between junior and senior faculty
- Promote stronger relationships among faculty and student affairs staff



for the curriculum...

- Increase the coherence of general education
- Create a more interdisciplinary curriculum
- Allow for skills to be delivered across the curriculum
- Enhance preparation for advanced study
- Allow for more engagement outside of the formal classroom experience





for academic and student affairs staff...

- Increase more meaningful partnerships with faculty
- Greater opportunities to recruit students to organizations
- Cultivate student leadership and development
- Increase participation in student activities and campus events
- Enhance interactions with other students



Campus Benefits

- Moves from student-centered to learning centered educational thrust
- Embraces disciplinary and multi-disciplinary perspectives
- Increases emphasis on active and collaborative learning
- Enhance the quality of the undergraduate education
- Foster a climate of innovation
- Increase the sense of community within the institution
- Promote meaningful collaboration between faculty and staff, faculty and administration.
- Promote a culture of assessment of learning about student learning.





UNLV EXAMPLES



Where to begin???

- Align resource expenditures with goals
- Secure dedicated locus of leadership position/steering committee (Coordinator/Director, Faculty Fellow)
- Gain department support (faculty and courses)
- Planning support for development
- Secure a permanent budget
- Faculty development
- Marketing/publicity
- Assessment – “Evidence of Program Impact”



Institutional Milieu

- History of conversations and initiatives around strengthening teaching and learning?
- Genuine interest in fostering institutional commitment toward cross-disciplinary and cross-unit collaboration?
- Willingness, flexibility, and ability to support changes, especially to change planning practices, and resource development?
- Commitment to focused arenas of change?
- Fit with other institutional priorities?





Potential Costs Learning Communities

- Start up costs for planning meeting and external consultation to stimulate dialogue and provide advice
- Publicity to faculty, advisors, and prospective learning community student participants
- Reduced or altered enrollment configurations
- Assessment and evaluation resources
- Peer facilitators
- Special field trips, cultural activities, or guest speakers
- Faculty/staff development



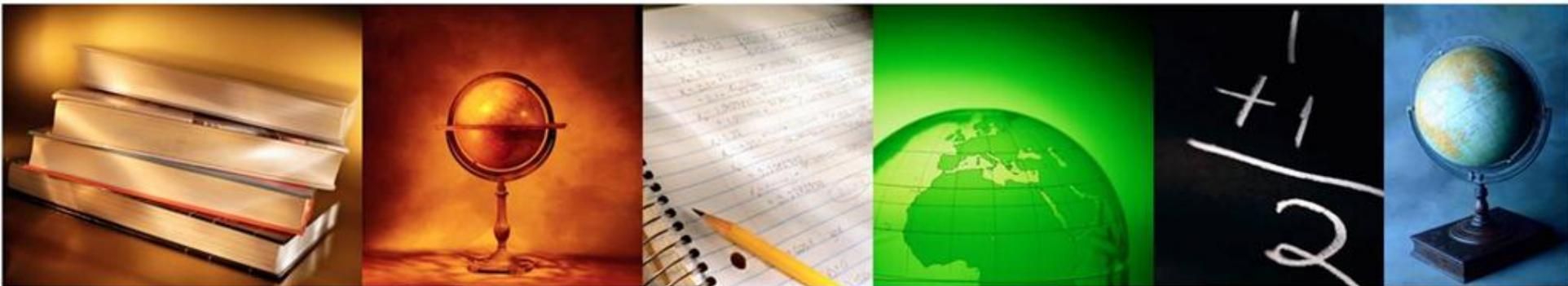
Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

- Finding ways to include all interested faculty and staff who want to be involved with learning communities
- Conducting good assessment and sharing results
- Partnering across campus
- Spreading the work and getting the program recognized around campus and with prospective students and their families.





LEARNING COMMUNITIES



QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION?