

ERIC Review: Learning Communities at the Community College

Contents Beginning in the early 1990s, learning communities (LCs)--deliberate restructuring of the curriculum to build a community of learners among students and faculty (Smith & Hunter, 1988)--began to be added to the curricular offerings at both two- and four-year colleges across the nation. LCs have been lauded as a major transformation in the way colleges approach curricular reform concerning teaching and learning (Cross, 1998; O'Banion, 1997). Although LCs have been praised, there continues to be a lively debate among community college educators as they examine this innovation and assess how it might help them serve a changing and diverse population of learners.

Pedagogical Foundations

Several LC leaders have cited the works of Dewey, Meiklejohn, and Tussman as important to understanding the foundation and early history of the LC initiative (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). John Dewey (1916) argued that one of the essential roles of education was to teach an individual to participate effectively as a citizen of democracy. Dewey stressed the importance of experience and application. Like the ancient Greek philosophers of the Socratic tradition, Dewey (1938) saw the interaction between teacher and pupil and between pupil and pupil as critical in the development of the learner.

Meiklejohn's creation of the first LC program in 1927 at the University of Wisconsin became a blueprint for others who followed (Gabelnick, et al., 1990). Meiklejohn shared with Dewey the notion of a good education "as a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility" (Dewey, 1938, p. 116). Meiklejohn expanded on the concept by stressing the importance of the "continuity of context rather than through the unity of content". Tussman (1969), a student of Meiklejohn, utilized the ideas of his mentor when he implemented the idea of LCs at the University of California at Berkeley. His work, chronicled in *Experiment at Berkeley*, fueled the flames of curricular reform in the 1970s at such institutions as Washington's The Evergreen State College, an LC leader through its Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.

LaGuardia Community College was the first community college to offer LCs in the late 1970s (Matthews, 1986). Daytona Beach Community College followed with its LC-focused QUANTA program in 1983 (Avens & Zelle, 1992), and Seattle Central Community College added LCs to its curriculum in 1984 (Tollefson, 1990). Over 40 community colleges are now listed on the National Learning Community Project Web site directory, having voluntarily registered as utilizing LC programs; LC leaders speculate there are many more community colleges offering LCs that are not registered on the list.

The literature on LCs at community colleges indicates that the advantages to this initiative are many, although the implementation of the LCs can be problematic. Before 1997, studies on LCs remained scarce, and most of what was known about them was

anecdotal; however, a number of recent studies with in-depth analysis concerning the effectiveness of LCs have been conducted.

LCs Defined

Learning communities deliberately structure the curriculum so that students are more actively engaged in a sustained academic relationship with other students and faculty over a longer period of time than in traditional course settings (Smith & Hunter, 1988). This restructuring "supports effective learning and creates an enhanced sense of academic community between students and faculty". Because of this increased amount of time between students and faculty members, instructors are much more aware of each student's learning style and needs, and students are much more aware of each other and their peers' learning.

LCs intentionally restructure the course unit by developing various kinds of interdisciplinary connections or linkages that engage faculty and students in "reconceptualizing social, economic, political, and multicultural issues" (Gabelnick, 1997, p. 40). Some institutions may link or cluster courses with other courses. This represents an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community and to foster more explicit connections among students, among students and their teachers, and among disciplines (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2002). Ideally, paired or coordinated classes require that faculty members jointly develop their syllabi, collaborate in their lesson plans and assignments, and plan complementary activities that reinforce interdisciplinary links. To incorporate each other's content and lesson plans to a certain degree, an LC often has a shared theme, develops similar skills, or has one of the classes provide the skill base for the other class (Gabelnick, et al., 1990).

In recent years, many educators have argued that in order for students to value the democratic process and to develop the skills of social responsibility, they must not be immersed in the traditional higher education model of teacher-centered classrooms where students learn in isolation from one another rather than in collaboration with each other in a shared learning process (Astin, 1985; Barr & Tagg, 1995). Gill (1993) argues that the experiences of the learners must not be ignored; they must somehow be brought into interaction with what is being taught. The "sage on the stage" notion still predominates in many college lecture halls today, Gill contends, where too often the instruction is delivered by "the expert handing down esoteric and privileged data to the lowly initiates". Gill concludes that the aim of education should be "to create an atmosphere which causes students to look forward to the class, to feel respected and needed in the pursuit of knowledge, and to respect and rely upon each other in these endeavors".

Gabelnick (1997), a major innovator of LC programs in the 1970s and 1980s, describes the importance of collaborative learning this way: "The challenge of educating a committed citizenry is to change the societal and university paradigm from a strategy of competitiveness to one of collaboration, from a perspective of scarcity to one of sufficiency and inclusion, and from a stance that looks for expedient solutions to one that

engages and commits to a series of values and a way of life". MacGregor (1990), citing the work of numerous learning theorists, argues that knowledge is socially constructed by communities of individuals rather than individually constructed. She writes, "Knowledge is shaped, over time, by successive conversations, and by ever-changing social and political environments".

The question often asked in the discussion of collaborative versus more didactic methods of teaching is whether a discipline's content is sacrificed when small group work replaces, at least in part, a strict lecture format (Bruffee, 1995; Smith & MacGregor, 2000). Most authors on the subject of LCs agree that what may be lost in content coverage is gained in depth of coverage and greater student engagement in the overall learning enterprise. The advocates of LCs claim the traditional delivery of higher education is flawed. They argue that the traditional delivery results in a number of problems ranging from high student attrition to very disjointed, departmentalized modes of learning that fail to establish any connection from discipline to discipline. Boyer (1987) laments the traditional tendency toward departmentalization in the following:

Colleges exacerbate this tendency toward self-preoccupation and social isolation. We found during our study that general education is the neglected stepchild of the undergraduate experience. Colleges offer a smorgasbord of courses, and students pick and choose their way to graduation. Too many campuses, we found, are divided by narrow departmental interests that become obstacles to learning in the richer sense. Students and faculty, like passengers on an airplane, are members of a community of convenience. They are caught up in a journey with a procedural rather than a substantive agenda.

[Learning Communities and the Community College Mission](#)

Why is there a need to rethink the community college curriculum delivery system? Rendón (2000) states that community colleges, based on the ideal of democracy, are often viewed as "vehicles of access and opportunity". The students served by community colleges are oftentimes from "ethnic and racial minorities, first-generation students, low-income students, students with low participation rates, and students who view community colleges as their last chance to realize their hopes and dreams" (Rendón, 2000, p. 1). She explains that for students to be validated, the classroom must be democratic and multiculturally inclusive. Studies on the benefits of LCs by Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo (1994) and others have led Rendón to advocate LCs as a way of promoting a multicultural and democratic community where learning shifts from passive to active, retention rates are higher, and students learn in collaboration with peers and faculty. Rendón lists seven suggestions for community colleges to follow, one of which is to design LCs that are relationship centered and connect faculty and students. Other writers on the subject, such as Matthews (1986), O'Banion (1997), Cross (1998), and Grubb, Worthen, Byrd, Webb, Badway, Case, Goto, and Villeneuve (1999) have shown, like Rendón how well LCs help achieve the community college mission.

The very fact that community colleges are attended largely by commuter students and

that many students have jobs off campus and are only on campus during the time of their scheduled classes, means that community colleges often lack a sense of community. LCs that give students a prolonged exposure to their peers and teachers for more than one class tend to build a sense of community that might not have developed under traditional curricular offerings. Faculty members also report a greater sense of community among their peers and a closer connection to the college as a whole as a result of teaching in an LC environment (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

An important part of the mission for many community colleges is developmental education. Many students arrive at the community college lacking basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Students often complain that the skills they are taught in the developmental education courses do not assist them later in taking content courses. As Trautmann and Boes (2000) state, the skill courses and the content courses are "an uneasy dance. Enter learning communities and the opportunities to provide for collegial and interdisciplinary interaction; they provide a chance to turn the awkward dance into a polished tango". Retention rates for students in developmental classes are higher when those classes are linked to content classes (Perin, 1999; Tinto, et al., 1994).

For community colleges that have established general education outcomes, LCs provide a means for achieving some of these outcomes in ways in which stand-alone courses could not. In the LCs established as a bridge from Leeward Community College to the University of Hawaii, West Oahu, students were exposed to three of the five endorsed general education skill standards: critical thinking, oral communication, and written communication (Lee & Nishigaya, 1999). Other colleges report that LC students earn higher grades, are retained at higher rates than stand-alone course students, "demonstrate greater progress in terms of intellectual development, indicate higher levels of involvement with peers and the campus, and express greater overall satisfaction with the college experience" (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, p. 192).

[Existing Program Formats](#)

LCs have a number of different configurations. The ones that seem to fit the community college campuses best are the linked (two) or clustered (three or more) classes with a common student cohort, and a fully team-taught community comprising two or more courses (Weber, 2001). Although the particular curricular configurations vary at different community colleges, LCs generally combine skills courses with content courses or combine two or three courses from different disciplines that satisfy general education requirements under a unifying theme (Gabelnick, et al., 1990). Discussed below are a few examples of the types of LC models community colleges have developed. For more extensive coverage of LC models at community colleges, see the National Learning Project Web site at <http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu>.

A team-taught LC was formed at Northampton Community College in Pennsylvania combining a critical reading course with a principles of sociology course (Trautmann & Boes, 2000). The students enrolled in the reading course would not normally have been allowed to enroll in the sociology course because of their low scores on a placement test.

Both instructors of these courses, however, carefully collaborated to create a fully integrated design in which assignments, syllabi, and instructional delivery all had infused elements of both courses; in addition, both faculty members attended the three-hour class that met three times a week, with considerable planning time required before and after the class.

A year-long LC program for first-year students at Daytona Beach Community College provided an example of a team-taught coordinated studies program (Avens & Zelle, 1992). Three courses were offered each semester in a fully integrated triad for nine semester credits. The fall's theme, "The Quest for Identity: The Search for Identity and Intimacy," included English Composition 1, Psychology of Adjustment, and Humanities 1. The spring's theme, "Threshold to the Millennium: Towards a Better World," included English Composition 2, General Psychology, and Humanities 2.

An example of a linked LC model that was not team taught was a first-year English composition class and a survey of U.S. history course at North Idaho College (Minkler, 2000). A cohort of students enrolled for a two-hour block and met three times a week for six semester credits. The instructor of the history course did not alter the course or assignments; however, the English composition instructor did match the writing assignments with the history assignments. Although the English composition instructor did occasionally attend the history class, the history instructor never attended the composition class.

[Recent Research Findings--Students](#)

Tinto et al. (1994) conducted the first extensive study on the benefits of LCs. It was a comparative and longitudinal study focused on the academic and social experiences of beginning college students at the University of Washington, Seattle Central Community College, and LaGuardia Community College in New York City. The results of this study suggested that LCs result in higher academic achievement for the students in an LC compared to those students enrolled in traditional stand-alone courses. Also significant was the lower attrition rate of the LC courses than that of the traditional courses. This was true of students who had voluntarily chosen to be enrolled in LCs as well as students who enrolled in these programs only because the traditional courses were full. The results of surveys and interviews suggested that students in linked, clustered, or coordinated studies classes "reported greater involvement in a range of academic and social activities and greater developmental gains over the course of the year than did students learning in the regular curriculum". Interviews and surveys also suggested that the students' comfort level for interaction had been enhanced by a "high level of social, emotional, and academic peer support that emerged from classroom activities".

For Tinto et al. (1994) the most important result of the research was the significant comparative difference between student outcomes in the traditional and the coordinated studies programs during the spring quarter at Seattle Central Community College. The persistence rate into the following fall quarter was "fifteen percent greater than it was for similar students enrolled in regular classes (66.7 and 52 percent respectively)". Tinto et

al. reported being surprised to find this much difference during just a one-quarter program. Another important finding was that linked classes or coordinated studies programs at Seattle Central Community College appeared to work well for community college students with substantial remedial needs. Other researchers on the subject have found that LCs are suitable for diverse learners, not just those who are at-risk and first-year students (Minkler, 2000; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

Perin (1999) reported similar findings at the college designated as Rho Community College (RCC) in her study where "students who tend to avoid general education, often because of past difficulties, improved when skills were taught in a relevant context". The relevant context that Perin referred to was achieved by linked course offerings at RCC. Perin noted, "Linked courses produced a better sense of community among students".

The most comprehensive multicampus assessment conducted on LCs to date was the 3-year effort known as the National Learning Communities Dissemination Project involving 19 institutions, including 7 community colleges (MacGregor, 1999). The goals of the project were threefold:

(1) to support the participating campuses as they more fully established, assessed and evaluated their learning community programs; (2) to disseminate information about the learning community initiatives on these campuses to a national audience; and (3) to feature the experience and knowledge gained by these institutions at a national learning communities conference in the final year of the project 1999

The common theme throughout the assessment results of the National Learning Communities Dissemination Project was that participation in LCs resulted in the same or higher grades for cohort students than for those in respective stand-alone course comparison groups. LC students at community colleges had significantly higher rates of retention than did their respective stand-alone counterparts (Ducher, Mino, & Singh, 1999; Jackson-Evans & Van Middlesworth, 1999; Mott, Chapman, Phillips, & Staub, 1999; Rings, Shovers, Skinner, and Siefer, 1999). In addition, students participating in LCs expressed the opinion that their experience had been very enjoyable. They "appreciated the open, comfortable, participatory, and supportive environment that was created in their LC" (Rings, et al., 1999, p. 45). All the institutions involved in the National Learning Communities Dissemination Project reported that students valued the sense of community experienced in the LCs. The participating students also reported that the learning experience was inherently better than what they had experienced in stand-alone courses. All colleges except one reported increased student retention rates and higher grade point averages.

Student surveys at Cerritos College (California) indicated that students who participated in LCs rated the overall experience as very positive, particularly the "shared learning experience, faculty and peer support, increased personal interaction with faculty, and the ability to express themselves in the small group setting" (Smartt-Gaither, 1999). The Cerritos College LC assessment results paralleled those at many other institutions regarding student perceptions that the workload was heavier and that the performance

standards were higher when compared to traditional stand-alone classes (Hellenberg, Stephens, & Versteeg 1999; Minkler, 2000; Weber, 2001). Lee and Nishigaya (1999) at Leeward Community College and the University of Hawaii, West Oahu, reported that students perceived higher performance standards set by the LC faculty, and they still rated the faculty members higher on student evaluations than faculty members in stand-alone classes.

In the Quanta Interdisciplinary Learning Communities Program, Daytona Beach Community College (Florida), researchers measured participants' cognitive development, particularly progress in cognitive complexity utilizing an essay-writing instrument, the Measure of Intellectual Development by Knefelkamp and Widick, and Perry's scheme of student intellectual development in the college years (Avens & Zelley, 1992). Compared to results from a study of national norms, the Daytona Beach Community College LC students showed greater movement along the Perry Scale than did students in traditional classes. The same assessment instrument was used at Maricopa Community Colleges with similar results (Rings, et al., 1999). MacGregor (1987) also addresses the improved student intellectual development as a result of LCs.

One community college in the National Learning Communities Dissemination Project, Delta College, located in mid-Michigan, reported that students in LCs, whether in linked, clustered, or coordinated studies programs, failed to show any higher grades than those in stand-alone courses. LC students also had a slightly higher tendency to drop or withdraw from a course. It is important to note that the LC instructors stated that they had higher expectations and standards in the LCs than they had for the same stand-alone courses. Of all the institutions in the dissemination project, Delta College was the only one to show such negative results for LCs. Despite these outcomes, LC students surveyed at Delta College reported overwhelming satisfaction (Fogarty, Weedman, Karls, Jones, and Siasoco, 1999). The results of the research at Delta College were similar to those of a different study conducted with North Idaho College and Spokane Falls Community College (Minkler, 2000).

Shapiro's and Levine's (1999) results indicated that in all of the studies involving LCs, the vast majority of students reported a greater sense of community among their peers and teachers, had a better grasp of the connections between disciplines, perceived their level of learning to be superior to that gained in stand-alone courses, and had a more positive perception of the college as a whole. On the negative side, students commonly complained about the heavy workload required in LCs and about registration issues; specifically, if a student withdrew from one of the LC courses, he or she had to drop all the courses in that LC. Another problem students identified was that the collaborative nature of LCs severely challenged shy students or some international students who were not accustomed to collaborative learning (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Hellenberg, et al., 1999; Minkler, 2000; Smartt-Gaither, 1999; Weber, 2001).

[Recent Research Findings--Faculty](#)

College LC bridge program summed up what many faculty members have shared in studies all over the country: "This is the most exciting educational experience of my long academic career. I don't want to go back to the old ways of teaching, and I hope we can develop more of these wonderful educational experiences for our students" (Lee & Nishigaya, 1999).

Experienced faculty members have found that the LC experience serves as an excellent faculty development opportunity that is rejuvenating as well as educational. Part-time and new, inexperienced faculty members viewed the LC teaching experience as a successful mentoring program when they were teamed with an experienced faculty member in the LC (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Hellenberg, et al., 1999; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

In their review of the research, Lenning and Ebbers (1999) report that LCs allow faculty to work together more closely and effectively, constitute a valuable activity for faculty development, and encourage faculty to share knowledge and pedagogy with each other. They also contend that LCs promote collaborative teaching, break down faculty isolation, increase collegial trust, and increase the degree of enjoyment and satisfaction with teaching in general.

Negative comments from participating faculty members pale when compared to their positive remarks about LCs; the most frequent complaint is that administrators are perceived as not understanding or supporting LCs (Hellenberg, et al., 1999; Minkler, 2000; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Weber, 2001). A small percentage of participating faculty members in some studies complained that fellow members of the faculty team did not contribute equally and that there was never enough time for the team to meet and plan (Hellenberg, et al., 1999; Minkler, 2000; Weber, 2001). At some institutions LC instructors noted that the scheduling and registration of LC students had not been well thought out, resulting in little or no promotion of the LC courses to the students, a lack of awareness or understanding on the part of advisors and counselors, and problems with properly enrolling students in both courses during registration (Weber, 2001).

Implementation

Elliott and Decker (1999) identify the steps necessary for the successful implementation of LCs. The steps involve establishing ownership, selecting a model, selecting faculty, recruiting students, developing partnerships between academic and student affairs, funding, and ongoing assessment. Shapiro and Levine (1999) state that it is crucial that faculty receive training to help them move beyond traditional classroom pedagogy.

To date the most comprehensive work concerning the implementation of LCs can be found in Shapiro and Levine (1999), *Creating Learning Communities: A Practical Guide to Winning Support, Organizing for Change, and Implementing Programs*. This LC guide provides detailed advice for both community college and baccalaureate curriculum planners who wish to develop LCs at their institutions. The book covers how to create a campus culture for LCs, develop the curricula, recast faculty roles and rewards, and build

administrative partnerships and assessment. It also includes overall information about LCs.

The literature reveals that the most successful LC programs are those that involve as much of the college as possible in the planning, including faculty, administration, academic affairs, student affairs, advisors and counselors, and former LC students. As Shapiro and Levine (1999) stress, the LC initiative needs to be reflected in the college strategic planning process in which the curricular objectives and priorities are identified and directly tied to the budget priorities.

It has been recommended that the best arrangement is a partnership between faculty and administrators who meet on a regular basis to discuss LC issues such as enrollment, scheduling, program objectives, and course needs (Elliott & Decker, 1999; Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Where administrators were knowledgeable about LCs and provided strong support for the initiative, LCs flourished with a number of offerings that were scheduled well in advance. Where administrators were less familiar with the LC initiative, the decision to offer the courses was made late in the registration process, and the program suffered from lack of support and very few offerings. Hellenberg et al. (1999) and Weber (2001), indicate that some administrators are concerned about the difficulty of scheduling rooms for blocks of time and the problems with low enrollments inherent in some of the LC options. Other problematic issues reported in these two studies are finding the funds necessary to support the program and funding faculty training.

In a study of two different community college LC programs, Minkler (2000) found that at the institution where key administrators were supportive of the program, faculty members were paid stipends for developing LCs. Instructors who taught either in paired or in coordinated studies LC models had the full 10- to 15-quarter credits of the entire LC count as their workload. At the second community college, where administrators showed little support, instructors were paid only for teaching a single course assigned to them in the LC; they received no stipends or released time for the extra consultative time and course planning time they were expected to contribute.

The main objection to the implementation of LCs seems to be the cost. Some authors recognize this as a reasonable objection but do not think cost is a sufficient reason for not implementing LCs. Initially, they concede, there may be some additional costs, but the results will eventually allow success to feed upon success, drawing students and sustaining them; their cost easily outweighs having students either fail or drop out during or immediately following their freshman year (Hill, 1985; MacLaughlin, 1996; Smith & Hunter, 1988).

[Conclusion](#)

The results of over a decade of research on LCs indicate that there are definite benefits seen in student retention, student satisfaction with classes, increased student success, and

reveals a high level of satisfaction as well as professional development from teaching in an LC. Trautmann and Boes (2000) state that even more important than these results is the intangible benefit of closer relationships among faculty, among students, and between faculty and students. The results of the research on LCs have helped confirm what the theorists like Dewey and Mielke anticipated about creating a community of learners. Further research on LCs, however, is still needed to add to the growing body of work on intellectual development and its appropriate assessment instruments.

Despite the very positive results in the assessment of LCs, community colleges will need to work out the problems that arise at a time of limited or dwindling funding resources: scheduling of facilities, training of faculty and staff, and recruitment of students into LCs. The literature makes a strong case that LCs be given serious consideration in setting college priorities. As Shapiro and Levine (1999) stress, "LCs have emerged as a practical, pedagogically sound concept for addressing the criticisms and challenges leveled at higher education today. Regardless of how we choose to define success in college--whether it is a statistical measure of persistence and retention or gains in cognitive development and writing abilities that show up as positive outcomes on student learning assessments--we now have compelling evidence to suggest that learning communities on campuses lead to greater student success in college"

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