Research to Practice

Learning Communities: Promoting Retention and Persistence in College

The NCTN Research to Practice Briefs are designed to disseminate emerging college transition research from a variety of sources in a user-friendly format.

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"Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

What are "learning communities" and why are they important?

GED recipients and other nontraditional adult learners have very low retention and persistence rates in college. Often, this is because they lack connections to other students and to support services on campus. Research has shown that "the more students are involved in the social and academic life of an institution, the more likely they are to learn and persist" (Tinto, 1998, p. 2). Learning communities offer students the social "glue" and academic support necessary to stay and succeed in college.

The basic idea of a learning community is that it is a cohort of students who take one or two courses together. Often a common theme links these courses (Cross, 1998). This arrangement offers students a deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning as well as more time for interactions between students and with teachers. Learning communities also provide more opportunities for students to interact with their peers because they frequently require work in groups. "The best learning communities are classrooms where students are connected through meaningful conversations in cooperative groups with each other and their teachers" (Hess & Mason, 2005, p. 30).

Social support may be crucial in successful transition to college (Hays & Oxley, 1986). "In smaller environments, students seem to gain a feeling of belonging from the personal relationships they are able to develop with teachers, administrators, and their cohort of students" (Jones, 2004, p. 1). Teachers are seen as fellow participants in the learning process, not necessarily the ones who have or know all the right answers (Kellogg, 1999). Learning communities thrive because they give learners an opportunity to make sense of their personal experience, something adult learners find worthwhile (Merriam and Caffarelle, 1999).

Learning communities are gaining momentum at two- and four-year colleges as a method to increase retention, persistence, and passing rates. Transition programs may find it helpful to steer their graduates toward learning communities or to develop learning communities in their own programs.

What are the models of learning communities?

There are at least five models of learning communities. According to Tinto (undated manuscript), despite their different designs, each model has three things in common:

- shared knowledge

- shared knowing

- shared responsibility

By linking courses, students can share, "as a community of learners, a body of knowledge that is itself connected" (Tinto, 1998, p. 4). Through shared knowing, students enrolled in the same courses get to know each other because they are together more often. And as members of the community, students are asked to depend on one another, work together, and share responsibility for getting the work done.

Linked Courses. Two courses are linked together; one is content-based and the other is usually application or skills-based. A single cohort of students take both courses (Kerka, 1999). For example, LaGuardia Community College in Queens, NY has a First Year Business Academy learning community. As part of this Academy, the Introduction to Business course is linked with the Basic Writing course. The two courses have been designed to complement each other.

Learning Clusters. A cohort of students take a semester load of up to four courses that link together. Typically, there is a theme to the courses and the faculty generally work together to create common syllabi and joint or overlapping assignments, and/or team-teach, although it is not the same at every postsecondary institution (Kerka, 1999). The Westside Technical Institute at Daley Community College in Chicago uses this model to address the needs of their students who would like to enroll in a vocational program but are not academically prepared for the program. This Career Bridge Program "offers an integrated set of courses in Reading/Employment, Mathematics, and TABE Test-Taking Strategies" (Mazzeo, Rab, & Alssid, 2003).

Coordinated Studies Program (CSP). Courses are integrated into a "block" of time around a specific theme. The staff plan and participate in all parts of the program and, generally, there is no distinction made between one course and another. Depending on the college's grading policy, students may receive one grade for the block or they may receive individual grades for each subject within the block (Sullivan, 2001). At South Seattle Community College, students can enroll in a CSP called "The Communication Connection," which integrates two courses, English and Communications, into one seamless course.

Freshman Interest Group (FIG). At least three freshman courses are linked together, usually according to academic major. There is also a weekly peer advising session where students can discuss aspects of their first year of study, such as coursework, professors, and adjusting to college life. This situation works best at large universities with freshman classes large enough to support several freshman interest groups at the same time (Kerka, 1999), providing students with several options. At the University of New Mexico, freshmen can participate in a math-focused FIG called "It all Adds Up." Students must register for a block of three courses composed of Intermediate Algebra, University 101, and What is Critical Thinking? Once students join the FIG they cannot drop out of any of the FIG-related courses.

Federated Learning Community (FLC). A cohort of students takes three theme-based courses as well as a seminar conducted by a master learner. The master learner is a professor from a different academic area, who also takes the three theme-based courses along with the students. The professor leads the seminar, which is designed to help the students get a better understanding of the material covered in the courses (Kerka, 1999). The State University of New York at Stony Brook recently ran a Federated Learning Community called "Issues in Health and Society." This FLC linked courses such as the History of AIDS, the Social History of Medicine, Medicine and Society, and Medical Anthropology.

What does current research say about learning communities?

In the mid-1990s, Vincent Tinto, an expert on the social dimensions of student learning, conducted a longitudinal study on the effects of learning communities on the academic and social experiences of beginning college students. Tinto looked at the Coordinated Studies Programs (CSPs) at Seattle Central Community College. In these programs, students enrolled together in several courses linked by a common theme. Students met for between 11 and 18 hours each week, in four- to six-hour blocks, for two to four days. In general, all of the instructors were present at all of the class meetings. Students shared a curriculum as well as the experience of learning together (Tinto, 1997).

Tinto and his fellow researchers compared the results of first year students in the CSPs with students that signed up for courses in the typical fashion. Through a series of questionnaires, classroom observations, interviews, and document review, the researchers found that beginning students in the CSPs were more involved in course activities and activities with other students outside of the classroom than other beginning students who did not participate in the CSPs. Students had a more positive view of all aspects of their college experience, such as the campus climate, other students, and the faculty. Also, CSP students had higher persistence rates than students enrolled in regular courses. Almost 84% of CSP students, compared with 81% percent of regular students, persisted to the following spring semester. The difference in persistence rates was even greater for the following fall semester. Almost 67% of CSP students persisted to the following fall semester as compared with only 52% of the regular students (Tinto, 1997).

The qualitative portion of the study of the CSPs at Seattle Central found that participating in a first-year learning community gave students the opportunity to develop a network of peers that helped them persist in postsecondary education. The students also learned how to construct their own knowledge. The professors challenged students' assumptions of learning and in the end, helped them to take ownership over their own learning process. Students in the CSPs were also exposed to a range of diversity in classmates' backgrounds, traditions, views, and experiences and found this to be very helpful in developing an understanding of different points of view (Tinto, 1997).

Beginning in 2003, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) conducted a study (Bloom & Sommo, 2005) of the Opening Doors Learning Communities Project at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York. The program served over 750 students who tested at below college level in reading, writing, and/or math. Students were randomly assigned to a learning community or to a control group. The learning community cohort took three first-semester courses together: an English course, a course in an academic subject, and a one-credit freshman-orientation course. The instructors included a counselor who helped students integrate the courses, address obstacles to success, and arrange extra tutoring and book vouchers. The first evaluation of the program showed that:

- Opening Doors students substantially outperformed control group students during their first semester at Kingsborough, achieving higher course passing rates, particularly in English.

- One year after enrollment, Opening Doors students were more likely to have completed their remedial English requirements (Bloom & Sommo, 2005, p. iii).

How else can students benefit from aspects of learning communities?

Due to cost, time, staffing, and communication constraints, it may not always be feasible for a college transition program to develop and implement a fully-fledged learning community program. Even in these cases, however, it is often possible to make smaller-scale changes that capture the spirit of learning communities. Some examples follow:

1. At your transition program, integrate subjects to make content more meaningful:

- Example 1: Pair a writing class with a computer class. In the writing class, students learn about writing research papers. In the computer class, the instructor can reinforce the research principles taught in the writing class by having students conduct online research and use a word processing program to write the paper.

- Example 2: Pair a basic computer class with career planning. In the computer class, students can spend the semester learning to navigate a word processing program and the internet while completing career planning tasks:

  - Navigate multiple Web sites devoted to career planning, complete online career inventories.

  - Research specific career requirements.

  - Write resumes and cover letters

- Write a mini-research paper on the career(s) of their choice.

- Example 3: Coordinate pre-algebra with writing. In the pre-algebra class, students can use a journal or notebook to record their thoughts on working through specific math problems or learning specific math skills. Instructors can respond to the students' journals in writing as well.

2. If your local college offers a learning community for beginning students, encourage your students to enroll in it.

3. If your local college does not have the learning community option, encourage two or more students to enroll in a course together, such as a developmental math course or an introductory psychology course. These informal learning communities can provide students with the support that all beginning college students need to help them persist with their education.

4. If your college transition program or ABE program is located on a college campus, find out if the college offers learning communities. Invite the Learning Community Coordinator or instructor to speak with your students. You should also arrange to have some of your students experience the learning community for a day. Request that the college extend the learning community program to include students completing their preparation in college-transition or ABE programs.

Where can I learn more?

Creating Learning Communities Online Resources

This regularly-updated online resource center is geared more towards the K-12 school system.
www.creatinglearningcommunities.org

Electronic Learning Communities (ELC)

The ELC Group in the College of Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology is led by Assistant Professor Amy Bruckman. Her research focuses on the design of communities on the Internet, through a constructivist theoretical framework that is based on the idea that people learn best when they are making something that is personally meaningful to themselves.**www.cc.gatech.edu/elc**

Learning Communities: Getting Started

This Maricopa County Center for Learning and Instruction (MCLI) Monograph by Geri Rasmussen and Elizabeth Skinner of GateWay Community College provides information on types of learning communities and offers steps for developing a learning community. The entire monograph is available for downloading and printing.
www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/ilc/monograph

Learning Communities Common/National Learning Communities Project

This site is maintained by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College. In 1996, the Center widened its mission to include learning communities from around the nation.
www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=73

Opening Doors Project at Kingsborough Community College

The learning community project at Kingsborough Community College has shown promise in retaining nontraditional students. **www.mdrc.org/publications/410/overview.html**
and **www.luminafoundation.org/newsroom/newsletter/May2004/MDRC.html**

West Hills College Bridge Program

Learning community resources for students and faculty. **http://whcbridge.com/lc100.html**

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