Learning Communities System Design Team

Final Report – April 2010

DESIGN TEAM PROCESS

Members

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Colleges Researched

SUNY & CUNY

> Jefferson Community College (Watertown, NY), Kingsborough Community College (Brooklyn, NY), LaGuardia Community College (Long Island City, NY), Monroe Community College (Rochester, NY), Nassau Community College (Garden City, NY), & Onondaga Community College (Syracuse, NY)

Non-SUNY

> Guilford Technical Community College (Jamestown, NC), Holyoke Community College (Holyoke, MA), Inver Hills Community College (Inver Grove Heights, MN), Lane Community College (Eugene, OR), Tri-& County Technical College (Pendleton, SC)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Definition of a Learning Community

- Intentionally link or cluster two or more courses around a interdisciplinary theme
- Enroll a common cohort of students
- Involve intentional restructuring of students' time, credit, and learning experiences
- Engage students in active learning and reflective practice

Goals of a Learning Community

- Enhance learning opportunities
- Foster a more integrated academic experience by linking disciplines, and therefore helping students see connections between courses
- Build connections between students and faculty and between the faculty, which can help students integrate into the college community
- Encourage peer interchange based on the collective construction of knowledge, mutual respect and shared goals, which can develop strong habits for peer-supported learning throughout the rest of college and beyond
- Cultivate critical thinking and reflection

Learning Community Structures

Beyond the basic characteristics, learning communities can take on a variety of structures. They are most commonly defined by how they vary on two characteristics; the level of student involvement, and integration of course content and therefore faculty planning. Various levels of

student involvement can include living-learning communities, where residential students are taking courses together, learning communities with extracurricular or co-curricular activities including service projects or field trips attached, and those with study periods included in addition to courses. The simplest form of course coordination is paired courses, where a cohort of students is enrolled in the same two to three courses as either part of the whole enrollment of the course or as a portion of a large lecture course. In varying degrees of integration and coordination faculty can plan one to two integrated assignments, play an active role in each other's lectures or have a fully team-taught program with an integrated syllabus.

Learning communities can have peer mentors or special advisors attached. They can also be sequential in nature where the same group of students takes the same section of a course in two semesters. They can be developed around courses required for a specific major, for a special population of students (e.g. incoming developmental students), or for those with an interest in a particular theme.

DESIGN TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS
College Policies about Learning Communities
- A dedicated professional to manage the process of learning community development and implementation
- Tangible faculty incentives that are clearly articulated up front (stipend, load reduction, etc.)
- A commitment to continually educating other members of the college staff and faculty about learning communities by including learning community content in NFI (New Faculty Institute) and presenting workshops at all staff and faculty institutes throughout the year
- Develop a webpage to explain, sell, and educate the MVCC community about learning communities
- A commitment to budgetary adjustments to support the expansion of learning communities which includes training, planning costs, and ongoing faculty collaboration
- Celebrate learning community success at MVCC with articles in Communitas and Panorama
- Include participation in a learning community on the student development record as an incentive for students to participate
- The college needs to be committed to supporting opportunities for faculty planning prior to the start of each semester and for ongoing faculty collaboration for the duration of the learning community
- In addition to providing opportunities for staff to travel to regional and national trainings, staff should also be encouraged to present at conferences on our learning community process of development and successes
- The college will have a two-pronged approach to development of new learning communities; allowing faculty to develop learning communities based on interdisciplinary connections to enrich learning experiences, and also to create learning communities to

target specifically identified student needs (e.g. classes that have low success rates in the traditional format)
- Careful collection of data to assess learning community effectiveness, including (1) on students' retention into the subsequent semester as compared with student retention for those taking the classes as stand-alone versions of the same classes; (2)data regarding % A, B, C, D, F, and W (same two groups compared); (3) student survey to gain student impressions of the benefits and areas for improvement

Faculty/Professional Development
- Consistent approach to training of faculty and staff involved in learning community development; both a commitment to sending staff for external training, and development of regular internal training specific to learning community instruction and development
- Build supports for participating faculty, through a mentoring program and regular training/meetings
- Send faculty and staff to attend The Atlantic Center for Learning Communities Best Practices Conference every fall.

Proposal of New Learning Communities
- A proposal form that is available online for faculty to use in proposing new learning communities
- A standing committee at the college that will approve faculty learning community proposals (perhaps the current design team will continue in that capacity)
- The standing committee, which should include representation from all academic centers and student services, may also propose future learning communities based on student needs

Learning Community Design
- Scheduling learning community courses in blocks at ideal times to aid in student learning and participation in the learning community courses
- Always attach ED100 to learning communities designed for first semester students
- Including student affairs and non-teaching academic affairs staff in every learning community, either through them teaching ED100 or assigning an "advisor" to each learning community
- Have fun and catchy names for the learning communities to assist with marketing and to help students feel excitement and attachment to their learning community
- Students will not be able to enroll in learning communities after the first day of classes, as building an integrated community is incredibly important to the success of an learning community
- Students are not able to drop out of one course in a learning community, they are only able to drop and add the courses as a whole block
- Instructors in learning communities should focus on activities and experiential learning strategies as hands-on, project-based learning is integral to fostering a feeling of shared purpose and teamwork