

Literature Review and Discussion of Learning Communities  
in Higher Education

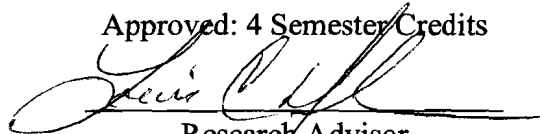
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**ABSTRACT**

Learning communities have been proposed and implemented as one way to address problems in higher education ranging from coursework lacking cohesion, disconnected campus members and the ongoing retention and attrition issues plaguing many institutions. The purpose of this comprehensive literature review is to define learning communities as they are utilized throughout higher education settings. A discussion will follow of the proposed purpose(s) and the history of learning communities along with where learning communities have been implemented and utilized and some important considerations when developing a learning community. The author will review the effects learning communities typically have on students, faculty and institutions where implemented through a discussion of the benefits and strengths in comparison to the challenges and weaknesses of learning communities in higher education. The author will follow the literature review with a discussion of the findings and offer practical

recommendations for consideration in further learning community implementation and assessment.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
<i>Statement of the Problem</i> .....	1
<i>Purpose of the Review</i> .....	1
<i>Assumptions of the Review</i> .....	2
<i>Limitations of the Review</i> .....	2
<i>Definition of Terms</i> .....	3
<i>Methodology</i> .....	3
Chapter II: Literature Review .....	4
<i>Learning Communities defined</i> .....	4
<i>Purposes of Learning Communities</i> .....	6
<i>History of Learning Communities</i> .....	8
<i>Where Learning Communities are used</i> .....	10
<i>Development of a Learning Community</i> .....	12
<i>Adult Learning Principles</i> .....	13
<i>Stages of Community Development</i> .....	13
<i>Effects of Learning Communities</i> .....	15
<i>Benefits &amp; Strengths of Learning Communities</i> .....	15
<i>Challenges &amp; Weaknesses of Learning Communities</i> .....	17
Chapter III: Discussion .....	19
<i>Review of Findings</i> .....	19

<i>Limitations</i> .....	20
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	20
<i>Recommendations</i> .....	22
References .....	23

## Chapter I: Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to first define learning communities as they are utilized throughout higher education settings to address various educational needs and goals. Next the author will discuss the proposed purpose(s) and history of learning communities along with where they have been implemented and utilized followed with a discussion of important considerations when developing and implementing a learning community. The author will review the effects learning communities commonly have on students, faculty and institutions where implemented through a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of learning communities in higher education. Lastly, the author will discuss the findings and offer practical recommendations for consideration in further learning community development, implementation and assessment.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Higher education faces many issues and problems today. Students and faculty alike often complain of large class sizes with little personal interaction or attention and courses that are separate and unrelated to one another or to other learning. Retention of students through graduation has seemingly been a problem throughout the history of higher education. These and many more issues have prompted higher education administrators to seek possible solutions wherever they might be found. One such possibility that has been implemented and highly praised is the concept of learning communities.

### *Purpose of the Review*

The purpose of this literature review is to define learning communities, review the proposed purpose(s) and history of learning communities, to discuss where learning communities are used, considerations for their implementation and the strengths and weaknesses of such programs in higher education. This will be accomplished through addressing the following research questions:

1. What are learning communities?
2. What purpose(s) do learning communities serve?
3. What is the history of learning communities?
4. Where are learning communities used?
5. What should be considered when developing a learning community?
6. What effects do learning communities have? What are the strengths and weaknesses of learning communities?

#### *Assumptions of the Review*

Basic assumptions of this literature review and discussion are that the information reviewed is an accurate and complete reflection of the uses, successes and failures of learning communities implemented on higher education campuses. It is assumed that there may be some bias toward the positive and desirable effects of learning communities by many of the authors cited because of their significant amount of personal investment in the topic.

#### *Limitations of the Review*

The topic of learning communities is a relatively new area of study with most material dated from the 1980s to the present. Many learning community programs are still very new and the efficacy of them has most often been documented as anecdotal



evidence. A great deal of the literature available was written by a handful of personally invested authors who may possess biases toward the strengths and desirable outcomes of learning community implementation and use. These same authors could possibly have a tendency to overlook or downplay any negative or undesirable outcomes of learning communities because of their personal interests in the topic. Much of the literature reviewed was also devoted to the assessment and praise of learning communities which could potentially contain biases toward the effectiveness of learning communities and their subsequent outcomes.

#### *Definition of Terms*

*Learning community* - a purposeful structuring of coursework which encourages cohesive learning and interpersonal interaction among its members.

*Cohort* - a group of students enrolled in a sequence or program of courses together

*Retention* - the ability of an institution of higher education to preserve the students that initially enroll at that institution through degree completion (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

#### *Methodology*

The collection of resources used to assemble this comprehensive literature review was largely compiled using institutional websites devoted to on-campus learning communities, web-based learning community resources, University of Wisconsin-Stout's library databases and catalog.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### *Learning Communities defined*

Learning communities are defined as an intentional restructuring of curriculum to link or cluster courses or coursework together to foster greater coherence between courses as well as to encourage interpersonal connections among students and faculty (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Tinto, 2003; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Learning communities are typically centered on a common coursework theme or based on learner commonalities such as first year or transfer student status where a common group of students, sometimes referred to as a cohort, enroll in the courses concurrently.

There are generally 3-5 distinct types of learning communities recognized in the literature with variations and combinations of them implemented as suited to meet the needs of an individual institution or program (Tinto, 2003; An Overview of Learning Communities, n.d.; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). The author has condensed the types into the following categories:

- a. Linked activities or linked courses
- b. Cluster or cohort learning
- c. Seamless or coordinated studies

Linked activities or linked courses are typically separate courses taught by different instructors with one or more activities or assignments which tie the courses together in some way (Tinto, 2003; An Overview of Learning Communities, n.d.). The classes chosen for this type of learning community are often larger lecture type courses where a group of 20 to 30 students enroll in the common courses (Smith, MacGregor,

Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). An important component in linked course learning communities is an additional course, commonly a seminar, taken by the learning community cohort in which there is often interdisciplinary discussion and community building activities. The linking activities structured into the courses may include cross-class discussions, evaluations, projects or papers that incorporate issues from both courses. Instructors often collaborate and co-plan the linking activities, but do not have to change much in their normal course instruction to achieve the goals of linked courses (An Overview of Learning Communities).

Linked courses learning communities are typically found in larger universities, in courses with high enrollment and often in the form of Freshman Interest Groups or Freshman Learning Communities (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). The University of Washington has utilized linked course learning communities with such themes as pre-med, business, law and order, and women in history. The University of Wisconsin-Marquette has also utilized linked course learning communities with themes including issues in education and environmental topics with much success (Smith, et al.)

Cluster or cohort learning is where students enroll in some or all of their classes together as a cohort or group (Tinto, 2003). The courses are typically not random and have been selected with a connecting theme such as a group of courses based on Mind and Body study or some established student connection such as a cohort of freshmen or the students' chosen major (Tinto; An Overview of Learning Communities, n.d.). The cohort model is widely used in education programs as well as programs of graduate and professional study.

A fine example of a clustered or cohort learning community comes from LaGuardia Community College (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). LaGuardia requires all full-time liberal arts students to enroll in a twelve-credit liberal arts cluster which includes an “integrated hour” in the curriculum where discussion and integrative assignments can be discussed and worked on as a community of learners.

Seamless or coordinated studies are typically the most involved of the learning community models. In this type of community, students might register for the courses separately but there is no distinction between the courses in the actual teaching and learning process (Tinto, 2003; An Overview of Learning Communities, n.d.). The class meets for an extended length of time several times a week where the curriculum of the separate courses are intertwined such that co-teaching and co-assessment of assignments is used to ensure that all of the objectives have been met for each individual course (An Overview of Learning Communities). Sometimes referred to as team-taught learning communities, the seamless or coordinated studies learning community model focuses on examining broad questions or themes and exploring interdisciplinary topics from multiple perspectives (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004).

A prime example of a seamless or coordinated studies learning community comes from The Evergreen State College in Washington State. Virtually the entire curriculum of Evergreen State College is team taught interdisciplinary coordinated studies programs (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004).

#### *Purposes of Learning Communities*

Patrick Hill in his inaugural address to the Conference on Learning Communities of The Washington Center for Undergraduate Education in 1985 emphasized that, “the

learning community movement, such as it is, is not a response to one problem in higher education: it is a response to a whole complex of issues....it is a vehicle for responding to a whole cluster of fundamental ills besetting higher education today" (para.1). Included in the issues addressed by learning communities are unmet expectations of students and faculty, inadequate intellectual interaction, lack of coherence between courses, lack of faculty development, complex and interdependent problems, non-completion rates of students and shrinking budgets (Hill). While each of these issues is indeed important and considerable, the author has chosen to focus on a few specific issues addressed frequently in the literature.

Learning communities are implemented on campuses to accomplish different purposes depending on the needs and goals of each individual institution or program. Often cited reasons for implementing learning communities are to achieve greater course cohesion, to instill a sense of community where students and faculty develop interpersonal and intellectual connections and to retain students in the educational system until graduation (Smith, 1991; Tinto, 2003; An Overview of Learning Communities, n.d.; Matthews & Smith, 1996).

Cohesiveness throughout educational coursework is desirable because it promotes a higher level of critical thinking and problem solving skills (Tinto, 2003). Traditional students who commonly enroll in stand-alone courses often experience disconnection between what they are learning in one course with learning from other courses such that their overall learning appears to be completely unrelated. Learning communities promote course cohesion where separate courses and distinct disciplines come to be viewed as complementary and connected in a logical manner (Smith, 1991).

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Development of a community encourages collaborative learning which entails the construction of knowledge through groups of students working together (Cross, 1998). A sense of community is advantageous because when it develops within a cohort, students build personal support networks, encourage one another, help one another and motivate fellow members toward achieving individual and group goals (Tinto, 2003).

Student retention is necessary and desirable because of ongoing higher education budget cuts and increasing competition for students among institutions. Less students stay at a college or university through degree completion than the number who enter and leave without earning a degree (Tinto, 1987). Retention is increased when a sense of belonging on campus is developed (Browne & Minnick, 2005). Researchers have consistently maintained that when social and emotional expectations of students are fulfilled on campus, students are more likely to persist in their education and that learning communities are a valuable tool in retention because of their social nature.

### *History of Learning Communities*

While learning communities are not considered a new innovation themselves, the modern learning community movement is a rather recent development, dating to the mid-1980s (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). The focus of recent learning communities is to, “purposefully engage faculty, staff, administration, and students in creating active learning environments that prepare students for work and life in a complex world” (Smith, et al., p. viii).

The work of John Dewey has contributed significantly to the modern learning community movement. Dewey wrote many books about the process of teaching and learning and promoted collaborative and cooperative methods in education whereby

students would become active and engaged in their learning (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Dewey stressed the individuality of students and promoted student-centered learning. Dewey insisted that teachers become experimental and intentional in their teaching efforts, familiar with their students such that their teaching and learning would ultimately build upon the individuality of each student. Dewey's vision was that of education as an open-ended process of inquiry requiring close student-teacher relationships so that teaching and learning became a collaborative effort, an inherently social process.

The earliest learning community cited throughout the literature is credited to the educational theorist Alexander Micklejohn (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Tinto, 2003). Micklejohn's insights into the fundamental importance of structure, curricular coherence and community are what make him a central figure in learning community history. Micklejohn formed the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin which lasted from 1927 to 1932 and consisted of a full-time, two-year residential lower-division program based on in-depth study of the "great books." Though it did not last long, it was considered a successful experiment in that it challenged many traditional higher education processes and procedures and produced an insightful guide for future learning communities (Smith, et al.).

Joseph Tussman, a student and friend of Micklejohn, began his own experimental college at the University of Berkeley from 1965 to 1969 (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Tinto, 2003). While Tussman's experimental college did not last long either, it too provided many

building blocks for future learning communities to build upon. Tussman focused heavily on the restructuring of higher education's approach to general education in the first two years of college whereby programs should be team-taught and interdisciplinary which would promote a sense of community among its members (Smith, et al.).

Other learning community experiments were short-lived until 1970, when The Evergreen State College, an alternative college in the state of Washington, was being established (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). The founders decided that the mission and approach to this new college would be based on, "yearlong coordinated programs that would be full-time, team-taught and organized around interdisciplinary themes" (Smith, et al., p 46). Evergreen's entire organizational structure was decidedly different from any other institution of the time. Faculty members were hired with clear expectations; roles and reward systems were specifically designed to support the interdisciplinary curriculum (Smith, et al.).

Much of the dissemination of practices, implementation and assessment of learning communities over the last 25 years has been based out of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Established in 1984, the Washington Center continues to promote and support learning communities through conferences, consulting, publications and faculty exchanges (Smith, et al.).

#### *Where Learning Communities are used*

Learning communities are implemented and utilized in countless ways across numerous disciplines. In fact, learning community programs can now be found at over



five hundred colleges and universities across the nation in nearly all types of institutions (MacGregor & Smith, 2005; Taylor, Moore, MacGregor & Lindblad, 2003). Learning communities are being used extensively throughout undergraduate education programs (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004; Tinto, 2003; An Overview of Learning Communities, n.d.), in online and distance education programs (Moller, et al., 2005) and even in high school education (Kilby, 2006; Metzger, 2006). The focus of this review is to assess and discuss the utilization of learning communities throughout higher education settings.

The bulk of learning communities implemented on higher education campuses are geared toward undergraduate education and the majority of those target first-year students (Taylor, Moore, MacGregor & Lindblad, 2003; Matthews & Smith, 1996). Commonly known as Freshman Interest Groups (FIG) or Freshman Learning Communities (FLC), this form of learning community aims to introduce and integrate first year students to campus life in hopes that they will acclimate positively to the campus and persist in their education with the institution to graduation (Talbert & Boyles, 2005). It has been shown that student success during the freshman year is extremely influential in future success throughout a student's education (Pope, Miklitsch & Weigand, 2005). Freshman learning communities typically include a peer advising component and a weekly seminar which assists students in developing connections between courses (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Some freshman learning communities also utilize common residence halls for enrolled students which are frequently referred to as living learning communities (Tinto, 2003; Smith, et al.).

Learning communities have been developed to focus on general education requirements, basic study skills or coursework in the major or minor (Matthews & Smith, 1996). When general education courses are clustered together in a coherent and meaningful way, students are more likely to draw connections between multiple disciplines and enhance learning outcomes. Basic study skills programs typically focus on combining skills courses such as writing, speech or math with other courses so that students are better able to draw connections between skills courses and content courses. Implementing learning communities within a major or minor is an ideal way to promote coherence between courses to achieve a broader understanding of the content.

Online and distance education programs are expanding on campuses nationwide (Moller, et al., 2005; Wilson, Cordry & King, 2004). It has been shown that online collaboration and work groups, essentially a spin-off of learning communities, can improve learner outcomes and strengthen relationships between students (Moller et al.). In a learning environment where face-to-face meetings may never happen, a sense of community among the members of an online course or program must be facilitated by the instructor (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Through discussions and online postings, students can get to know one another and develop relationships just as they would in a typical classroom.

#### *Development of a Learning Community*

Execution of a learning community requires much deliberation, planning and careful thought. Learning communities do not automatically happen when learners are grouped together or enrolled in common courses. Along with customary budget and administrative concerns and issues typical of any higher education implementation, other

significant considerations must be taken into account. Of these additional considerations, recognition of adult learning principles and the stages of community development are of utmost importance.

### *Adult Learning Principles*

Adults have unique learning needs and as such, these needs must be recognized and addressed in a higher education learning community in order for it to be successful. While educational theorists have not definitively determined an empirically discrete domain of adult learning principles, some clear commonalities across the research have been recognized and discussed by Brookfield (1986). Among these many commonalities is the idea that adults are lifelong learners, continually learning, whether formally or informally. Adults maintain the ability to learn and often build upon previous learning experiences to understand and process new learning in a reflective and personal way. Additionally, adults tend to learn best when they have a sense of responsibility for their learning and in a learning environment that is non-threatening and supportive of experimentation. Adults are self-directed learners who generally prefer their learning to be problem-centered and outcome-oriented whereby they can apply their learning in a meaningful way.

### *Stages of Community Development*

Communities of learners do not just automatically happen by enrolling students together in a group of courses. There are stages of development a group must go through in order to maximize their experience of community. Community building requires time, effort and sacrifice on the part of community members whereby a transformation from a collection of individuals into a genuine community whose sum is greater than its

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individual parts is the ultimate goal (Peck, 1987). The stages of community development include pseudocommunity, chaos, emptying and collaborative community.

The first stage of community development, termed pseudocommunity, is a phase where group members appear to be an instant community (Peck, 1987). There are no problems or disagreements in the group because group members do not acknowledge differences and do not ask tough or personal questions in the interest of avoiding conflict. The essential dynamic of pseudocommunity is conflict avoidance where minimization, lack of acknowledgement and ignoring individual differences are the key characteristics of the group.

The chaos stage is the second essential step in the process of community development (Peck, 1987). In the chaos state, individual differences are brought into the open, often characterized by fighting, struggling, arguments and discontent among group members. The chaos stage is uncreative, unconstructive and accomplishes no purpose yet is a necessary step in the process of community building.

Resolution of the chaos stage is brought about through emptiness, which is the third and most crucial stage of community development which bridges the gap between chaos and community (Peck, 1987). Emptying is a process whereby previously held barriers to communication including expectations, prejudices, solutions, feelings, assumptions, ideas, motives and needs are acknowledged and released. The emptying process is a difficult kind of self sacrifice likened to a death of the will.

The final and desired stage of community development is that of true collaborative community. Characterized by a quiet calming peace, members begin to share and accept one another, differences and all (Peck, 1987). In a true community,

diversity is valued; respect for each individual is pervasive and evident through the sacrifice of individual desires for the good of the group. There is a commitment and accountability to the community as a whole, individuals develop real and personal connections and support one another in helpful ways where the tough questions are valued and continuous improvement is the new norm.

### *Effects of Learning Communities*

#### *Benefits & Strengths of Learning Communities*

Learning communities are commonly praised because of the many benefits and strengths they have been shown to generate. Among these benefits are the sense of community that develops throughout the learning community between students and faculty alike. Courses become more cohesive and a higher level of thinking and learning is achieved. Faculty benefit from a renewed interest in teaching and learning and benefit from professional and personal development through collaboration with peers.

Learning communities tend to create a sense of community on campuses in two ways: socially and academically (Matthews & Smith, 1996). Socially, students can develop a much needed support network through friendships and comfortable interactions with fellow community members. A high point of learning communities is the sense of belonging and the interpersonal connections that develop between students in the cohort and also between students and faculty. Students tend to form strong social bonds and support networks through their participation in a learning community (An Overview of Learning Communities, n.d.).

Academically, with faculty members more easily accessible through open communication and discussions, community members can develop valuable working

relationships and collaborate with faculty members on future projects and ideas (Matthews & Smith, 1996). Interaction with faculty is seen as more effective and thorough because there is individual attention and appropriate feedback that is sometimes lacking in traditional classrooms (An Overview of Learning Communities, n.d.). Student retention typically increases for students participating in a learning community when compared to peers not participating in a learning community (Mendelson, 2006; Matthews & Smith).

In a learning community structure where courses are integrated and commonalities noted across disciplines, students begin to think on a higher plane and are awakened to the broader contexts of what they are learning (An Overview of Learning Communities, n.d.). Through the learning community structure, students begin to recognize the natural connections between disciplines that appear disconnected to students outside of the learning community structure. Critical thinking skills are developed and strengthened as students are exposed to various, sometimes conflicting, perspectives on the same issues and ideas. Learning communities call for students to construct knowledge together which engages students both socially and intellectually toward development of cognition and an appreciation of the group learning experience (Tinto, 2003).

Faculty who teach in learning communities can reap many benefits including professional and personal development. Collaboration with peers empowers faculty to branch out of their specific areas of expertise, to learn and develop new ideas and to cultivate a renewed interest in teaching and learning (Smith, 1991).

### *Challenges & Weaknesses of Learning Communities*

As with any research topic, there are indeed weaknesses and criticisms to be found in the topic of learning communities. Though not addressed as extensively throughout the literature as the benefits and strengths, challenges with community isolation, cliques, interpersonal conflict and numerous faculty issues have been documented and discussed in regards to learning communities (Talbert & Boyles, 2005; Browne & Minnick, 2005; Jaffee, 2004; Mendelson, 2006).

Members of a learning community tend to spend a significant amount of time together, especially those enrolled in residential programs that live and learn together. Isolation from other students on campus can occur whereby those enrolled in a learning community do not interact with older, more mature and academically serious students (Jaffee, 2004). Students in learning communities can become too comfortable in the confines of the community that they do not venture outside of their comfort zones to establish other friendships or pursue outside interests (Talbert & Boyles, 2005). This is a problem because it can foster dependence on one another where independence and a healthy interdependence are not developed or refined.

Peer group issues can arise in learning communities, especially among groups of inexperienced freshmen (Jaffee, 2004). While peer groups can be positive and encouraging, they can just as easily become negative and discouraging to community members and faculty alike. Cliques have a tendency to form among students that can divide the community and cause conflict and unrest in the classroom. Disruptions caused by student conflicts impede the very collaborative learning that learning communities encourage. Students who spend an excessive amount of time together engage in a great

deal of communication. While member communication can potentially enhance learning, it can also lead to the spread of misinformation and a hardening of attitudes and beliefs about a professor or course that is difficult if not impossible to change or refute.

Faculty issues can be abundant within the learning community structure. Of the faculty who willingly participate in learning community instruction, complaints of students who are disrespectful, rude, disruptive and immature abound because of the aforementioned cliques and peer group issues (Jaffee, 2004). Collaboration with one or more outside faculty person takes extra time and effort which can be seen as cumbersome by busy faculty members (Mendelson, 2006). The traditional higher education reward structures in place at most institutions tend to deter faculty from choosing to participate in the collaborative work and effort necessary of learning community implementation.

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### Chapter III: Discussion

The purpose of this comprehensive literature review was to define learning communities, to discuss their purpose(s) and history, to learn where they are implemented and utilized, to consider the development of learning communities and to review and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of learning communities in higher education. To that end, the literature review was indeed successful in answering the research questions thoroughly and decisively.

#### *Review of findings*

Learning communities are commonly defined as a purposeful structuring of coursework which encourages cohesive learning and interpersonal interaction among its members. Learning communities are typically based upon a specific theme or learner commonality which establishes the makeup of the cohort. There are three main types of learning communities which can take on various forms as appropriate for individual institutions and programs. The three categories include: Linked activities or courses, clustered or cohort learning and seamless or coordinated studies.

Learning communities are not a recent innovation but have grown into a rather large movement with over 500 recognized communities on campuses across the nation. Learning communities can be found in all types of higher education institutions and in a variety of programs. A significant number of learning communities are targeted toward first-year undergraduate students to increase retention and success rates among that significant group of students.

Development of a learning community requires much careful planning and thoughtfulness. It is of utmost importance that planners of a learning community

recognize and appreciate the unique needs of adult learners as well as the process of community building that groups must go through to achieve true community. If developers implement a learning community model without an understanding of these key concepts, the learning community may fail and developers will be left wondering what went wrong.

There are of course benefits and challenges to learning communities. Strengths of learning communities include an increase in course cohesiveness for students, an increase in interpersonal relationships among students and faculty alike, an increase in critical thinking and higher level thinking among students and an increase in the retention of students in the higher education system to degree completion. Weaknesses of learning communities include isolation, peer group issues, cliques and faculty struggles.

#### *Limitations*

The topic of learning communities is a relatively new area of study with most material dated from the 1980s to the present. With much of the literature on learning communities being written by a handful of personally invested authors, biases toward the strengths and desirable outcomes of learning communities may provide an inaccurately positive portrayal of the implementation and use of learning communities. These same authors may have a tendency to overlook or downplay any negative or undesirable outcomes of learning communities because of their personal investment in the topic. Much of the literature found was dedicated to the assessment and praise of individual learning communities which could potentially contain bias toward the effectiveness of those learning communities.

#### *Conclusions*

While learning communities can benefit students, faculty and the campus as a whole, they should not be entered into lightly or implemented on a whim. As with any innovation, much planning and assessment must take place to determine if a learning community and which type of learning community or which aspects of the different types would be best suited to an individual institution's needs. Learning communities are not a universal remedy for all issues or problems in higher education and can lead to serious problems for participants and the institution alike. When implemented and administered properly, learning communities can and do produce desirable outcomes but when implemented and administered poorly, serious drawbacks are likely to occur.

Among the many benefits learning communities can bring to students are to provide a replacement social network and support system that is desirable in the transition from high school to college life. There are several dimensions of social support that can be addressed through the community which include physical, emotional and informational support. The learning community can become a place of physical support for students because friendships and working relationships with fellow cohort members are established such that borrowing or asking for physical assistance in the form of a ride or other ways become acceptable and eases transition anxieties for students in a first year learner program. Emotional support is conveyed when students feel free to express concerns and problems to fellow cohort members and can seek out advice and assistance from fellow cohort members with both school and personal issues. Informational support can be transmitted throughout the community where students provide course and institutional information to one another in any number of ways from personal conversations to emails and telephone calls.

Community members are not the only benefactors from implementation of a learning community. The institution as a whole benefits greatly from increased retention and graduation rates. Ideally, it is much more cost effective for institutions to admit and retain students throughout their educational career than to admit and lose students to attrition whether students transfer to other institutions or drop out of higher education entirely.

### *Recommendations*

More detailed descriptions and critiques of programs would be helpful for those considering implementation of a learning community. Because programs vary so extensively it would be helpful and ideal for assessment coordinators to thoroughly explain and describe their programs for others to learn from them.

As suggested throughout the literature, further assessment of learning communities is necessary in order to document the effectiveness or lack thereof in learning community programs (Taylor, Moore, MacGregor & Lindblad, 2003). Future assessment should focus on student learning outcomes and the effects of learning communities on all individuals involved in the community, not just the outcomes specific to students.

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