

Learning Communities Research and Practice

Volume 1 | Issue 3

Article 3

2013

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, K. E. (2013). Learning Communities and the Completion Agenda. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 1(3), Article 3.

Available at: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol1/iss3/3>

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Learning Communities and the Completion Agenda

Abstract

Learning communities are widely recognized as a powerful pedagogy that promotes deep learning and student engagement, while also addressing a range of challenges that plague higher education. The Completion Agenda represents a complex set of intersecting priorities advocated by federal and state government, nonprofit organizations, colleges, and universities that shift the national focus from expanding access to degree completion. Policy shifts and emerging educational practices aligned with the Completion Agenda such as dual credit courses, prescriptive degree maps, and the expansion of online general education courses are considered in terms of their impact on the administration of learning community programs. Although subtle adjustments in curricula may be necessary, learning communities remain critically important to preserving the quality of student learning and the integrity of undergraduate curricula in a policy environment that sometimes seems to emphasize efficiencies in degree completion above all else.

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Keywords

completion agenda, learning community program leadership

“The learning community movement, such as it is, is not a response to one problem in higher education...it is a vehicle for responding to a whole cluster of fundamental ills besetting higher education today.”

Hill (1985)

Nearly three decades after the Inaugural Conference on Learning Communities, hosted by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, learning communities continue to provide a powerful mechanism for addressing a range of challenges in higher education. In 1985, Dr. Patrick Hill referenced problems such as the mismatched expectations of students and faculty regarding undergraduate education, alarming rates of non-completion among students, inadequate levels of interaction among students and between students and faculty, and a lack of curricular coherence in general education as problems that were particularly apt to benefit from learning communities. As an advocate for learning communities in 2013, I find myself still referencing these problems as a rationale for continuing to expand themed learning communities program on our urban research and academic health sciences campus. After all, an impressive evidence base has amassed in support of learning communities as a means of intentionally fostering deep, integrated learning and enhancing student persistence and success, particularly for at-risk students (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Love, 2012; Rocconi, 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Despite the myriad benefits associated with increased access to learning communities and other high-impact practices—both in terms of the quality of student learning, as well as student persistence—rates of degree completion in the United States have remained stubbornly flat for decades. Furthermore, America’s global rank in the percentage of young adults holding postsecondary degrees has been slipping (OECD, 2011), prompting significant concerns regarding the future economic and social health of our nation. The Completion Agenda has subsequently emerged as a complex set of intersecting priorities advocated by federal and state government, nonprofit organizations, and colleges and universities that are aimed at significant improvements in degree completion by the mid-2020s. Millions of dollars have been directed to more than a dozen major initiatives, all designed to scale up this effort at different types of institutions across the United States (O’Banion, 2010). The Completion Agenda has prompted many states to adopt performance-based systems of allocating funding for higher education that incentivize improvements in degree production (National

Governors Association, 2010). Some states are developing parallel student aid policies that link financial aid awards to progress toward degree goals, typically evidenced by student's successful completion of a requisite number of credit hours per year. I believe that this paradigm shift from access to completion can pose challenges to leaders of learning community programs. At the same time, I believe that learning community pedagogies can preserve the quality of student learning and the integrity of undergraduate degree programs in a climate that can seem to prioritize efficiencies, cost-reduction, and workforce development over all else.

My state has been a leader in implementing performance based outcomes funding for higher education, and the concomitant shifts in educational policy have had interesting consequences for our themed learning community program. For example, there has been a sharp increase in the availability of dual credit or concurrent enrollment courses in high schools, which enable high school juniors and seniors to earn college credit for general education courses. We have found that freshman composition is the most frequently earned form of dual credit taken by incoming students, and it also happens to be a staple across most of our themed learning communities. Credit hour caps have been imposed on undergraduate degrees, limiting students' opportunity to explore new areas through elective credit, particularly within professional degree programs subject to accreditation standards. We recently have built "degree maps" for our undergraduate degree programs that reflect our state-wide transferable general education core, and these maps feature prescriptive combinations of courses that help to keep students on track for an on-time graduation. Our degree maps will be adjusted over time based on the sophisticated mining and analysis of course enrollment data from past graduates, and they will ultimately be used to support intrusive academic advising and strategic enrollment management.

In combination, dual credit courses, caps on credits per degree, the transferable general education core, and degree maps will almost certainly help students to reach their degree goals more efficiently and with the least amount of debt—which are undeniably positive outcomes for our students. Yet marked shifts in course enrollment patterns prompted by these initiatives demand nimble responses by learning community programs, which seem jarringly at odds with the pedagogical and philosophical foundations for the learning community movement. Rather than letting themed learning communities evolve organically through faculty partnerships built upon shared interests, values, and goals, we

must now (more than ever before) intentionally engineer learning communities around combinations of courses apt to be taken by students in particular clusters of majors.

Pressure to reduce the cost of a college degree as well as the time needed to complete it has given rise to MOOCs (massive open online courses) as a potentially “disruptive technology.” Even traditional online course offerings can expand access to higher education and help students to maintain continuous enrollment in summer months (Moloney & Oakley, 2010), which certainly are consistent with the Completion Agenda. Online learning communities could theoretically be created to support shared, collaborative construction of knowledge and shared responsibility for learning through peer review and group projects. Indeed they may provide enhanced opportunities to engage with diversity across state and national borders in ways that are simply not feasible in standard place-bound classrooms. At the same time I am skeptical that the depth of social engagement possible in a MOOC could remotely approximate that supported by students co-registering in a cluster of linked courses spending hours together each week. It would also seem administratively daunting to attempt to coordinate integrated assignments and means of assessing student learning across multiple MOOCs, though I would not be surprised if this is attempted in the future.

With any effort to reduce instructional costs, there is often an evolution towards standardization of course content. Standardization can be quite important for ensuring that students are achieving learning outcomes consistently across multiple sections of the same course, and it is a pragmatic necessity when there is high turnover among multiple contingent faculty and graduate student instructors. Yet curricular standardization too often evolves to have a focus on “coverage”—and deep, integrative learning is difficult to achieve if coverage is the aim (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). It also becomes more challenging to provide students with opportunities to connect classroom learning with out-of-class experiences such as service learning or campus events when members of the instructional team are contingent faculty who may be teaching across multiple institutions and thus are less connected with campus and community resources.

Despite the confluence of forces that accompany the paradigm shift from access to completion, I am extremely optimistic that learning communities will thrive and indeed become an essential means of preserving the quality of student learning. The tension between the Completion Agenda and the learning

community movement actually represents a false dichotomy in that learning communities (when designed effectively and facilitated by thoughtful and engaged faculty) can play a critical role in actually achieving the goals of the Completion Agenda. Indeed, learning communities can help to make deep, integrative learning the standard, rather than the exception, among college students. The onus is on us to ensure that the right students are proactively targeted, since it is not realistic at many universities to scale them across an entire curriculum. For beginning students, learning communities might ideally be preceded by a summer bridge experience, which could help to prepare students and provide a sense of readiness for integrated and collaborative learning. Hansen, Chism, and Trujillo (2012) found that students participating in a summer bridge program followed by a themed learning community had significantly higher first year grade point averages and better one-year retention, even after accounting for variables typically confounded with self-selection. Learning communities are a high impact practice in their own right, but they also have the potential to serve as a platform for service learning, experiences with diversity, collaborative assignments and projects, and writing-intensive courses. In this sense they are a vehicle for delivering combinations of high impact practices, and there is growing evidence that such combinations are of significant benefit to students, particularly those from underrepresented groups (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Eaton, MacGregor & Schoem, 1993).

We must be intentional about growing learning community programs strategically. This entails securing the resources and time necessary to ensure that students' learning experiences are meaningful, relevant to their lives, and deeply engaging, and that a focus on quality teaching and deep learning is recognized as the basis of a curricular model that contributes to persistence and retention. Above all, we need to continue to cultivate an evidence base to guide campus decision making—and to defend our practice as a means of ensuring quality during the press for completion.

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