Learning Communities: Increasing Academic and Social Engagement

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Presentation Outline

“New Era Learning Communities”
Building a Learning Community
The Key Communities
Best Practices and Tips

“New Era Learning Communities”
• “Refers to a new stage in learning community work—where curricular reform is cast more broadly as educational reform.”
• “The starting point for planning learning communities is no longer a conversation between faculty keen to teach together, but an institution’s commitment to its students—from their arrival to graduation.”

There is NO Single Model
• Learning Communities vary across institutions
  • Cohorts
  • Integrative assignments
  • Developing strong partnerships between academics and student affairs
• Educators as Inventors
  • Designs must work for the students it is intended to serve on a particular campus.
• When Learning Communities are integrated and tied to the institution’s mission and goals, they become a powerful intervention strategy for student success.

“Shared Benchmark”
• a common cohort of students taking two or more classes together;
• a robust, collaborative partnership between student affairs and academic affairs;
• and explicitly designed integrative learning experiences for students.

“Building a Learning Community”

The WHY?
The WHAT?
The HOW?
**House of Cards**
- The Foundation
- The Framework
- The Doors and Walls
- The Rooms
- The Roof
- The Additions
- The Maintenance

**The Foundation**
- What is the purpose?
- What is the problem or issue you are trying to solve?
- What are the learning outcomes?
- What resources are needed?
- What curricular or educational reform are you trying to solve?
- What data on student success is informing you?

**The Doors and Windows**
- For whom and why? How are you intentionally reaching out to those students?
  - Design with Diversity in Mind
  - If you build it, who will come?
- How does it connect to the strategic goals of the university? The Mission?

**The Framework**
- What structure will fit the outcomes? The needs of the students? The university’s mission and goals? The reality?
- What model will work at your institution?

**The Rooms**
- Positions
  - Student Staff
  - Faculty
  - Coordinators
  - Administrative Support
- Partnerships
  - Registrar
  - Orientation
  - Advising
  - Program Structure

**The Roof**
- Where do programs report at the institution?
- Who has administrative oversight?
- What does supervision and leadership entail?
The Additions

- How can this initiative continue to respond to needs and changes and priorities of the institution?
  - Example of enrollment issues at CSU
  - Example of Undeclared Students or Life Science Learning Community

Maintenance

- Telling the Story
- Evaluation and Program Review
- Making changes
- Assessment and Program Review as an ongoing cycle

Colorado State University

- Colorado State University is a land-grant institution and a Carnegie Research University (Very High Research Activity)
- About 29,100 total students and 26,650 resident-instruction students
- About 22,500 undergraduate students, 3,600 graduate students, and 510 professional veterinary medicine students
- Students attend from every state; 80% are Colorado residents.
- 13 percent of U.S. students are ethnic minorities.
- Entering freshman class of about 4,600 students
- About 1,475 new transfer students
- The average entering freshman ranks in the 74th percentile, brings a 3.59 grade-point average, and has an ACT composite score of 24.7 or an SAT combined score of 1,142.

Eight Colleges

- Agricultural Sciences
- Applied Human Sciences (Health and Human Sciences)
- Business
- Engineering
- Liberal Arts
- Natural Sciences
- Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences
- Warner College of Natural Resources

Strategic Connections

CSU STRATEGIC PLAN

- Integrate Academic and Co-Curricular Experiences
  - Goal 14: Learning Communities: Develop residentially based learning communities that capitalize on our strength as a destination campus.

STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVES OR “THE RETENTION PLAN”

- Increase support for students in the first two years, including "Promoting successful transitions in and out of the classroom – Learning Community enhancement"
- More recently, “expand Learning Community options to serve a majority of first-year students”
Learning Communities @ CSU

Strategies that structure ways of enriching student learning and connecting students’ in-and-out-of-class experiences

Why Key?
- 1998 Study
- Persistence
- Academic Performance
- Satisfaction

With attention to the experience of Students of Color, First Generation to College and Non-Residents

Persistence and Ethnicity
Graduates and still enrolled after 5 years

Retention varies significantly by the level of students’ parent education level

Source: Office of Budgets and Institutional Analysis Freshman Retention Study
Most Who Leave Depart Early...
50% of those who will leave have done so by end of freshman year; 83% by end of sophomore year (Class entering 1999)

Early interventions are most effective

WHY DO STUDENTS STAY?

Social Integration + Academic Integration

A promising way to meet needs of students

- A safe place to learn – free to express themselves and learn from one another
- A supportive place to learn – feel less alone and more confident in ability to succeed
- Conduits to an array of campus resources
- Belonging in college
- Learning deeply, making connections

Mission

To assist students with their transition to and through their first two years at Colorado State University by providing an enriched academic and social environment that is welcoming to students of all backgrounds and experiences

Description

- The Key Communities are diverse first and second year learning communities with an integrated curriculum and co-curricular elements in order to increase retention and academic performance of participants, promote campus and community engagement, promote student learning, and promote diversity awareness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academics</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Diversity</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Service</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop meaningful learning/academic experiences for students</td>
<td>Healthy, inclusive communities to collectively and culturally engage students and faculty</td>
<td>Encourage diversity and inclusion in learning and community engagement</td>
<td>Engage students in service-learning opportunities that contribute to their personal and professional development</td>
<td>Engage students in purposeful, meaningful service that contributes to their personal and professional development</td>
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The “Key-Thos”

Tinto’s Theories

- A culture of high expectation
- Clear road map to completion
- Settings that provide academic, social, and personal support
- Valued members of the institution
- Settings that foster learning

Paul’s Principles

- Connect to the best of CSU
- Intentionality
- Diversity
- Integration of curriculum and co-curriculum
- Honorary Experiences

Design with Diversity in Mind

- Fundamental Experience is one of Alienation
- Presumption that "I won’t do well"
- Thought by students and reinforced in the environment
- Must construct the experience with diverse students in mind
- Place where it is safe to ask questions
- Place where there are others who share the experience
- Place where students are known and cared for, where honest feedback occurs
- Place where the best of what CSU offers is guaranteed
- Strategies conceived without diversity explicitly in mind often miss the target.

Goals of Key

- High academic performance (GPA)
- High retention and graduation rates
- Academic engagement and campus involvement
- Student satisfaction

Diversity of Key

- Students of Color
- Non-residents
- Low-Income
- First Generation

Index Differences

- Key
- CSU

The Key Communities
Courses are the Key

- Need to group the right courses to maximize student success and sustain the LC
- Need to select the right courses
  - Make sense in terms of student enrollment patterns and curricular pathways

The Key Communities

Key Orientation

Courses are the Key

- Need to group the right courses to maximize student success and sustain the LC
- Need to select the right courses
  - Make sense in terms of student enrollment patterns and curricular pathways

The National Resource Center for Learning Communities.

LIFE102 Biology
PSY100 Psychology

(Key Cluster: Psychobiology)

PSY100 Psychology
LIFE102 Biology

Supplemental Instruction

Designated number of seats reserved in specific sections of three or more courses that are "clustered" together so that students in a specific LC can enroll in the entire cluster

Key Cluster: Bridging Biology and Chemistry Gulf

CHEM111 General Chemistry
LIFE102 Biology

Supplemental Instruction

Designated number of seats reserved in specific sections of three or more courses that are "clustered" together so that students in a specific LC can enroll in the entire cluster

Linked or Paired Courses

Community building and connection making falls to the teachers of the smaller classes

NR120A Environmental Conservation
KEY 192

Linked or Paired Courses

All of the students in one course are also enrolled in a second course.

- Teachers meet to design integrative assignments
- Some schedule courses back to back
- Offer courses in two time blocks but on alternate days

CO150 College Composition
KEY 192
Examples of Models at Your Institutions

Other Cluster Themes within Key
- Math Matters
- Who am I? Discovering Our Stories
- Culture and Communication
- Interpersonal Relationships: The Human Connection
- Science, Society, and the Environment
- Rebels, Outcasts and Society
- Psychology of Diversity
- Holistic Health Care
- Global Sustainability
- Art and Activism
- Education and Diversity
- Wildland Explorers
- Create Your Story

The Key Communities

Key Mentor Role
**Academic Guides and Coaches**
- 10-15 hours a week
- 19 first year students
- Role model academically, socially, personally

**Undergraduate Teaching Assistants**
- 3 credit hours
- Seminar Course
- Course design and Co-facilitation

The Key Communities
Other Structures within Key
- Intentional Recruitment/Outreach
- Application/Contract
- Supplemental Instruction
- Coordinators (full-time staff)
- Expression of core values
- Early Warning Survey
- Grade Monitoring
- Required Activities

Key Community Benefits
- Sense of community
- Having a mentor
- Living together
- Connections/Networks
- The friends
- Having smaller classes
- Cluster Classes
- Going out and volunteering

From the Fall Key Community Program Evaluations

Cumulative GPA Since 2005

Student of Color Retention

First Year Retention by Index
National Survey for Student Engagement

- Results indicate that Key LC students are more engaged (as measured by NSSE constructs) compared to other LC students and also compared to Non-LC students.

- There are very large differences between the mean scores of Key LC students and the other two groups for both the Enriching Educational Experiences and Active Learning Experiences constructs.

- Key LC students also score substantially higher than the Non-LC and remaining LC students for Emphasis on Diversity and moderately higher than the other two groups for Out-of-Class Interactions with Faculty.

NSSE Study

Active and Collaborative Learning Benchmark

- Enriching Educational Experiences Benchmark
- Supportive Campus Environment Benchmark

Learning Communities done well

- A strategically-defined cohort of students based on campus data
- Alignment with institutional mission & goals
- A broad base of support across divisions (including key administrators)
- Robust partnerships between academic affairs & student support services
- Infrastructure & leadership that promotes collaboration
- A focus on integrative, applied & interdisciplinary learning
- Established ongoing faculty development & professional learning
- Assessment at several levels (classroom, program, campus—using quantitative & qualitative methods)

The Washington Center @ Evergreen State College, http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/home.asp
Recommendations for Faculty

- Ground courses in the curricular pathway of students
- Make sure that it does not work against the self interests of faculty to be involved
- Award and acknowledge faculty who commit to this experience
- Bring faculty into the community experience
- Work with Learning and Teaching Centers to provide professional development opportunities
- Define roles

Recommendations for Students

- Structure program in a way that is intentional about student interaction and integration
- Find your students
- Make the experience honorary
- Align courses within curricular pathways of students – not against student self-interests to be involved
- First-year students do not do optional

Recommendations for Program

- Align with institutional priorities (minutes)
- Not a replacement for any service
- Not a lone-ranger or band-aid solution
- Be aware of impact of decisions – intentionality
- Focus resources on programs that have most change of being sustained
- Imperative to have integration of academic and student affairs – both divisions need to assume responsibility for learning
- Collaboration
- Why – how – what

Recommendations for Leadership

- You need leadership – someone needs to direct university wide Learning Community initiatives
- Become friends with so many folks on campus
- Form a Learning Communities Council
- Tell the story
- Become acquainted with the literature and resources at the National Resource Center
Coordinating an institutional program such as a learning communities program requires knowledge about best practices in the field and your campus institutional data as well as imagination, leadership, and passion. It also calls for a deep understanding of the institutional culture that will allow a program to thrive, evolve, and provide support in meaningful ways.
## Learning Communities – A Guide for Program Development

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