LEARNING COMMUNITIES—
INCREASING ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Intention, Implementation, and Investigation

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What is a learning community?

“a variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students.

They represent an intentional restructuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community, enhance learning, and foster connections among students and their teachers, and among disciplines.

At their best, learning communities practice pedagogies of active engagement and reflection.” (p.20)*

Session Overview

- What is our *intention* in creating learning communities in community colleges?

- How should learning communities best be *implemented* in the context of community colleges?

- How can we *investigate* if learning communities are working for our students?
Intention

What is our intention in creating learning communities in community colleges?

- What are our institutional goals and desired student learning outcomes (SLOs)?

- Who are the students we are serving?
Intention:
What are our institutional goals?

- **Henderson Community College**: to increase student access and success, to promote excellence in teaching and learning, and to foster diversity and global awareness

- **Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College**: to improve the employability and quality of life of south central Kentucky citizens

- **Ashland Community and Technical College**: to meet the academic, workforce training, and lifelong learning needs of its community
Q: Given the institutional goals we have identified, what are the student learning outcomes that you would like students at your college to be able to demonstrate?
Intention: Essential SLOs—the LEAP Report

“The LEAP National Leadership Council recommends, in sum, an education that intentionally fosters, across multiple fields of study,

- wide-ranging knowledge of science, cultures, and society
- high-level intellectual and practical skills
- an active commitment to personal and social responsibility, and
- the demonstrated ability to apply learning to complex problems and challenges
Intention: Essential SLOs—the LEAP Report, cont.

The council further calls on educators to help students become ‘intentional learners’ who focus, across ascending levels of study and diverse academic programs, on achieving the essential learning outcomes.

But to help students do this, educational communities will also have to become far more intentional themselves—both about the kinds of learning students need, and about effective educational practices that help students learn to integrate and apply their learning.”

www.aacu.org/LEAP or College Learning for the New Global Century, AAC&U 2007:4
Intention: Who are the students we are serving?

Q: While acknowledging the strengths of our students, what challenges do they face, both in and out of school?
Q: Given the challenges our students face and the student learning outcomes we’ve identified, how can learning communities bridge the gap between the two?

When learning communities are *integrative* and *holistic*, they can help bridge the gap.
Implementation

Given our student learning outcomes, our students, and how learning communities can serve to bridge the gap between the two...

**Q:** How should learning communities best be *implemented* in the context of community colleges with respect to...
Implementation

...program design and support?

- Student Success course in the link – especially important at community colleges
- Collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs regarding recruitment, advisement, registration, faculty support, etc.
Implementation

Given our student learning outcomes, our students, and how learning communities can serve to bridge the gap between the two...

Q: How should learning communities best be implemented in the context of community colleges with respect to...
Implementation

...classroom activities and assignments?

- Student-centered classrooms
- Active and collaborative pedagogies
- Integrative assignments that address a real-world problem
- Scaffolded activities including low- and no-stakes writing
Implementation: Creating Integrative Assignments

- **Freshman Composition**
  - Write an argument driven essay and cite source material

- **Student Success Seminar**
  - Write an honest self-reflection

- **Introduction to Sociology**
  - Discuss the impact of race and ethnicity on power and privilege
Implementation: Creating Integrative Assignments

Q: Given the student learning outcomes of these three courses, create an integrative assignment that gives students the opportunity to demonstrate that these outcomes have been achieved.
Implementation: Creating Integrative Assignments

ENGLISH

Scaffolding

STUDENT SUCCESS

SOCIOLOGY

Integrative Assignment
Investigation

Q: How can we investigate if learning communities are working for our students?

Again, when learning communities are holistic and integrative, they can help bridge the gap between the challenges our students face and the student learning outcomes we want them to achieve.
Investigation:
Assessing Our Students’ Development

- **Pre/Post Survey**
  1. What do you believe are your personal and academic strengths?
  2. What do you believe are your personal and academic challenges?
  3. To what degree do you generally interact with other students in non-learning community classes you have taken?
  4. How would you describe your interactions with your instructors in non-learning community classes you have taken?
  5. What connections, if any, do you think you might find between the other two courses (that is, not the integrative seminar) that are linked in this learning community?
Investigation:
Assessing Integrative Thinking

For a Mental Health and Introduction to Philosophy learning community:

Every Human Service Agency has a Philosophy and a Mission Statement. Research the Philosophy and Mission Statement of a Human Service Agency of your choice. For this assignment you have to provide the following information:

- Name, address, telephone number, email address, and hours of operation of the agency
- Describe what type of agency it is (e.g. hospital, drug treatment, or domestic violence) and the population that it serves.
- How long has the agency been in existence?
- Identify from your Philosophy class, which Philosopher’s philosophy or point of view is most compatible with this agency.
- Provide a brief background on the work of your chosen Philosopher.
Investigation: Assessing Integrative Thinking

- The Decision Tree for Assessing Integration and Revising Shared Assignments and Activities
Investigation: Assessing Integrative Thinking

Possible Integrative Assignment prompt revision, based on the decision tree:

- Choosing from among the Human Service Agencies and Philosophers about which you have previously written:
  - Provide specific examples of the Human Service Agency’s practices and connect them to specific elements of the work of your chosen Philosopher in order to *demonstrate the connection between* the two. [B]
  - Discuss the mission statement of one Human Service Agency *in light of* the work of one philosopher whose point of view you believe to be most closely aligned with your chosen agency. [B]
  - Does the mission of this agency deviate from the philosopher in any way? How? Is there another philosopher whose work is also compatible with this agency? If so, explain how you see this. [C, D]
Investigation:
Assessing Integrative Thinking

Possible Scaffolding, based on the decision tree:

- (In Human Services) Choose a Human Service Agency. Identify its name, address, telephone number, email address, and hours of operation. List how long the agency has been in existence and its region of operation. Describe what type of agency it is (e.g. hospital, drug treatment, domestic violence, etc.) and the population that it serves. Identify and explain its mission statement. (This could be repeated for many agencies, in succession.)

- (In Philosophy) Provide a brief background of a Philosopher and explain the main tenets of his or her philosophy or point of view. (This could be repeated for each philosopher studied, in succession.)
The bottom line?

We believe that learning communities best address the needs of community college students when pedagogies are student centered and holistic, and are focused on helping students think in an integrative way.
Investigation:
Select Student Success Data

Case study:
Kingsborough Community College, Brooklyn, NY.

The following data are from MDRC’s six-year follow-up report on Kingsborough’s Opening Doors Learning Communities.

Investigation:
Cumulative Credits Earned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Program Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>52.3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: * indicates a statistically significant difference.
Investigation:
Degrees Earned at Any College

*Note: The asterisk (*) indicates a significant difference between the program group and the control group.
Investigation:  
Key Effects of the Program

- Six-year graduation rate of learning community students higher than that of the control group
- Students attempt and earn more credits and demonstrate greater persistence and retention
- Students move more quickly through the developmental English sequence
- Qualitative improvement in students’ experiences in college, as reflected in CCSSE and SENSE data
Questions?

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The purpose of this tree is to provide a guide to assessing student work for evidence of integrative thinking. To answer each question to the left, consider your students’ work. If your answer is “Yes,” move on to the next question. If your answer is “No,” consider the suggestions in the box to the right as a way to modify your prompt and/or course activities. When you reach a “No” there is no need to move on to the next question. If your answer is “maybe,” consider the suggestions in the box to the left as if your answer were “No” but then continue to the next question. The numbers inside the “No” box can serve as a way of identifying a stage of integration.

A. To be answered by each LC instructor: In this assignment, what student learning objective(s) for your course did you want students to demonstrate that they had achieved? Does the work show evidence that the student has achieved the objective(s) you’ve identified?

- Yes
  - Consider ways to revise your assignment to encourage students to meet your intended objective(s).
  - Are there ways to prompt students more specifically to provide evidence of meeting your objective(s)?
  - In your prompt, do you refer to course activities or materials that students can draw from?

- No [0]

B. Does the work show sufficient evidence that the student is relating content (e.g., concepts, texts, language) among all LC courses/disciplines or bringing content from all courses to bear on a topic or issue?

- Yes
  - Consider ways to revise your assignment to encourage students to integrate content from all courses.
  - Is your prompt addressing a meaningful problem that can best be solved through an integrative approach rather than a single or multi-disciplinary approach?
  - Is the prompt itself using integrative language (e.g., relate, overlap, in light of, founded, couched in, connected to)?
  - Is the prompt asking students to draw content from all courses in a balanced way?

- No [1]

C. Is the integration in this work sustained beyond a simple statement of relationship?

- Yes
  - Consider how your assignment can be revised to encourage sustained integration.
  - What are some sub-questions you might add to the prompt to create more opportunities for integration?
  - Consider offering scaffolded classroom activities that invite students to practice making meaningful connections.
  - Consider asking for multiple drafts to provide opportunities for students to develop integration.
  - Do you provide feedback that stimulates deeper integrative thinking?
  - Have you considered asking students to explain their responses to your feedback in subsequent drafts?

- No [2]

D. Are there places in the work where the student missed opportunities for integration?

- No [4]
  - Consider revising your assignments and supporting activities to maximize opportunities for integration.
  - Does the prompt invite students to think creatively about the ways in which course materials relate to each other and/or the topic or issue?
  - Consider offering scaffolded classroom activities that invite students to practice making meaningful connections on their own.
  - Consider asking for multiple drafts to provide opportunities for students to develop integration.
  - Do you provide feedback that draws students’ attention to missed opportunities for integration?
  - Have you considered asking students to explain their responses to your feedback in subsequent drafts?

- Yes [3]