

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Learning Communities: Chaos or Cooperation?" by Newt Smith,
3/1/01

As a freshman this year, I was, at registration, presented with the option of participating in a learning community. I declined the option, and I would like to tell you why. Dr. Will Keim, one of Western's more recent guest lecturers, described in one of his speeches the difference between a collective and a community: a collective, he said, is a loose association of persons taking part in social activities while a community is a series of interpersonal relationships based upon mutual respect and compassion. A collective is pleasant and diverting but relatively shallow in comparison with a community. Humans stand in deep, fundamental need of community, and are, with rare exceptions, almost always forced to accept the collective as a substitute. Of no one is that more true than of the average college freshman. The true community functions as a family, and the overriding problem of my generation is that either through self-alienation or circumstances beyond our control, the majority of us do not know a "functional" family from a hole in the ground. And whether students are willing to admit it or not, they are searching for the things they lack (like a family) and will respond to such things as fill that need--especially if they don't have to call it by those names.

I did not join a learning community because I did not want to be disappointed; I did not want to walk into the experience ready to have real relationships only to find that the majority of my fellow students were waiting for the dumb meeting to be over so they could do something else and that the professor was subtly checking his watch because he wanted to get home to his family. Now that I know a little bit more about the learning communities, I am aware that this is hardly a universal scenario, but I doubt I would be mistaken in calling it a common one.

Because of my convictions on this subject, I am delighted with Dr. Newt Smith's article and I am especially pleased with his apt and elegant description of the "insignificant adult." Dr. Smith defines the insignificant adult as one who attempts to "control [students] instead of guiding them." Students will perceive as insignificant any adult who presents himself as a member of their community but doesn't prove himself committed to each student, the way a genuine parent would. I agree with Dr. Smith's assertion that teachers must "personally [engage] individually with students, finding out their background, learning styles, and academic and recreation experiences." Another thing that most of you who have been teaching for any amount of time probably know is that many, even most of your students will not perceive your interest in their academic success as a true interest in their personal well being until you prove to them how the two are related. In the context of a community, this is even more essential than within a classroom environment.

I believe that mandating participation in the learning communities for next semester's freshman is a mistake. I also think I know why the faculty have received this command from on high: it is likely the conviction of the administration that if students spend their first year in the context of these groups, they will make friends and be reluctant to leave WCU. That, at least, is how I would interpret the phrase "persistence in the freshman year." This positive effect on retention may be true, but it will not contribute especially to the success of the learning communities if an active endeavor is not made to transform them into true communities. If freshman participation is mandated, the students have the right to expect that the learning community experience will be the best possible way to spend their freshman year of college. If they find themselves in a stultifying, stagnant environment of low commitment from their leaders and unchallenged apathy from their fellow students, the students will not have a satisfactory experience, and it is likely that the retention problem will be aggravated by the learning community requirement. If, on the other hand, faculty are prepared to rise to the opportunity, to show active concern in a student's personal and academic affairs and to present themselves as real people--willing to become significant figures in their students' lives, then the learning communities could be the greatest thing for Western since the passing of the bond referendum.

Brittany Harrison, Freshman, Secondary English Education

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Dr. Smith seems to me to have struck the nail square upon the head with his article on learning communities. While the university supports these ventures as a way to promote the essence of higher education (serious thought, original ideas, inquiry, and reflection), and while we all hope that learning communities do something to solve our retention problems, what the faculty faces now is a huge challenge. Will the faculty follow Dr. Smith's advice and work on facing the current problems within learning communities? Or will the faculty continue to hammer fists upon lecterns, speak above rowdy classes, and in some cases give up hope for learning?

I'll be frank: I am a student. I have no letters to append behind my name. My experience with higher education has been limited to my four semesters here at Western. And many of you might dismiss what I am about to say simply because I am young, idealistic, and surely have no idea what I'm really talking about. But I feel that the faculty must make the decision to effectively solve problems in learning communities. There is no other answer. Individually, the students have little power over how learning communities will work. Our administration has made the choice for all freshmen to live in a learning community. So how can you help us solve these problems? I challenge you, as a student to the faculty, to challenge me. I challenge you to care about me. I challenge you to eat dinner with me. I challenge you to light my curiosity on fire. I challenge you to set me on a course of thought that will lead me to life-changing conclusions. I challenge you to fulfill my expectations of a real university.

Maybe twenty years ago, higher education might have been different. I wouldn't have had to ask you to challenge me. I would have come to college as a self-motivated being, and I would have addressed my own problems with my own personal discourse. However, we live in a society where the average duration of a shot in a movie is 8.4 seconds, where we need medicine to help us focus, and where the average student has been trained to slouch in front of a television, passively wasting brain cells. Again, we can either complain about this or we can take measures to deal with it.

The problem will not go away, and your choice is to deal with it or to ignore it. Most of you have doctoral degrees in your field, and most of you had to display a superior level of thinking and problem solving to attain your degrees. I respect you and admire you. I hope one day to join you. Like you I hope to better our society through higher education. But if we truly want to better our university through learning communities, we must not ignore the problems associated with them. Please, as a student who truly wants our university to succeed, address the problems in learning communities. Challenge and love your students. Pay attention to how Chancellor's Distinguished Teachers instruct. Take a course yourself and feel how it is to be a student once again. Collaborate with one another to gain new ideas on how to handle these problems. Be the community of scholars that represents a university.

Thank you in advance for your time, your energy, and your compassion about my education.

James Hogan, Sophomore, Secondary English Education