



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 13, No. 4

December 1, 2000

Learning Communities: Are They Worth the Investment?

WCU is in its third year of enrolling freshmen in "Learning Communities." These learning communities typically link three freshman courses around a central topic, and the students take the three courses as a group. In addition to taking the three courses together, learning community students live in the same residence hall, engage in special activities with the group outside of class, and get additional support from a Student Affairs staff member and a peer mentor.

The primary goals of learning communities appear to be improving retention and grades, increasing student satisfaction with the college experience, and increasing interaction between students, faculty, and the university community at large. Retention is the primary goal and reason for piloting the first learning communities in the fall of 1998. These goals could be viewed as either social or academic, but the connection between the social and academic goals cannot be overlooked. For example, there is the belief that "happy and satisfied" students will remain at WCU and make better grades. Hence, increasing student satisfaction and involvement in the university will improve retention and GPA. The question remains, however, have we achieved these goals with the learning communities?

Based on current university data, learning communities have not met the goals of improving retention and/or grades at WCU; there are no significant differences in retention or GPA between students involved in learning communities and those not involved. As faculty who were involved in the first piloted learning community in the fall of 1998, our initial suspicion was that there would be no differences in GPA, considering that we taught both those involved in a learning community and those who were not and could make cursory comparisons. The university data subsequently supported our initial suspicion.

So, are there any differences between learning communities and regular classes? The biggest difference we observed was in the social component. Students in the learning community bond together as a social group even prior to the first day of class. Adjustment to college is stressful and building a new social support system, after leaving the old one at home, is crucial to successfully adjusting to college life. The students are more vocal and interactive in the classroom compared to students in regular classes, and the students provide social support for each other. Many of the students appear to like the learning community concept, even though some also say too much "togetherness" can prevent them from "branching" out and forming other friendships. So, yes, there may be at least social value in learning communities, but we need to explore this further and examine the effect on the academic goals.

A major challenge for any teacher is maintaining control of the classroom in order to achieve academic goals while still allowing free exchange of ideas and thoughts; this balance of control and freedom may be even more difficult within a learning community. The college classroom is often the first learning environment that encourages freedom of expression. Many freshmen say that their high school classrooms were highly structured and that they were not allowed to question any information. Learning community students, as a bonded unit and being

the adolescents they are, may try to take advantage of the classroom environment with their contribution to class discussion, quickly diverting the focus from the academic to the social. Freedom can thus be a two-edged sword. We want students to critically analyze the material and contribute to class discussion, but their immaturity and lack of self-discipline is often apparent when they go off on tangents without remaining focused on the academic task at hand. Thus, when asked by a college professor as to their opinion on a subject of discussion in the classroom, the students sometimes express a personal opinion irrespective of rational and logical conclusion(s), without thinking critically about the subject or without considering a set of objective facts. These personal opinions can quickly become the dominant discourse with learning community students. There is a delicate balance between allowing students the freedom of expression and keeping them focused on achieving academic goals. Thus, discipline can be a problem in the learning community classroom as students ban together in an effort to control the discussion, especially when, according to one learning community teacher, the "social" leaders override the "academic" leaders. A subsequent "gang mentality" can surface. It takes a seasoned and experienced teacher to "let go" in the learning community classroom and yet maintain its desired direction.

While the concept of the learning community is to increase interaction between faculty and students, the type of interaction should be carefully considered. Somehow, out-of-class activities such as going to "Six Flags" just do not quite achieve the connection between the social and academic components, in our view. This type of increased interaction could be viewed by students as meaning that the faculty are their "buddies." While offering caring and genuine support to students should be of utmost importance, this could be misperceived by freshmen and result in their perception of the classroom as a time for social rather than academic interaction, hence contributing to the previously mentioned problems in the classroom. We are reminded of a parent who once told the child, "I cannot be a parent and a buddy at the same time."

While it is laudable as the goal of retention to strengthen the connection of students to the university environment, what is or should be the connection between the social and academic areas? This answer has yet to be determined. Having "happy, satisfied" students does not nor will not guarantee academic success or improved retention. Whereas the learning communities appear successful in energizing the social component of education, problems exist in correlating this social energy with the academic component of university learning. One of the first academic "lessons" that freshmen should learn in order to achieve academic success is responsibility for their own learning. Many traditional freshmen are shocked by differences between the high school and college classroom and the expectation of studying two hours outside the classroom for every one hour of class time. Are learning communities providing this lesson? So far, we have not been successful in channeling the social energies into the academic arena and achieving the connection between the two.

Considering the fact that learning communities are an integral part of the new Liberal Studies program to be implemented next fall, it is time to seriously consider whether learning communities are worth the amount of resources invested. If the answer is "yes," then we must address how to appropriately and successfully link the social and academic goals of learning communities to really improve retention and student success at WCU.

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The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.