Chapter 2

The Learning Communities Demonstration: Theory and Implementation

The programs in the Learning Communities Demonstration were chosen to capture the experiences that are currently available to students who are enrolled in community colleges across the country. This chapter begins with a description of comprehensive learning communities in order to provide a context for the learning community programs that were designed and operated by the colleges in the demonstration; it then goes on to describe the site selection process and the learning community programs at each college.

Picturing Comprehensive Learning Communities

As discussed in Chapter 1, proponents of learning communities believe that learning community students will develop closer ties with peers and faculty members and gain greater mastery over subject matter than they would in a more conventional college program, resulting in higher academic achievement and persistence. This theory of change assumes the successful implementation of five key elements of learning communities: curricular integration, pedagogical strategies that encourage active and collaborative learning, faculty collaboration, student engagement arising from strong relationships among students and between students and faculty, and the integration of student support services. Table 2.1 shows these elements and associated practices in detail.

The extent to which the learning communities in the demonstration appeared to incorporate each of these elements, and the challenges that coordinators and faculty faced in implementing them, are described in the chapters that follow. To provide a context for this discussion, the following section, drawing on both theoretical and empirical work, offers brief definitions of each concept and examples of its application in learning communities.

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1Minkler (2002); Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004).
2Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Heyes, and Schneider (2008). Neither researchers nor practitioners can be certain that each component is equally important — or important at all — in generating positive impacts on academic outcomes for students. However, it would be near-impossible to design an experiment that isolated the effects of each, and so administrators and practitioners must rely on the theory behind the inclusion of each of these components when choosing what to emphasize in their learning community model, rather than waiting for rigorous evidence to arise.
The Learning Communities Demonstration

Table 2.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples of Practices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curricular integration</td>
<td>Courses are linked thematically, with shared content and assignments, in order to construct shared, relevant teaching and learning experiences.</td>
<td>Aligned syllabi; overarching theme; joint assignments; joint grading; cross-course, project-based learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active, collaborative learning</td>
<td>Pedagogy promotes critical thinking through experiential, collaborative, and reflective learning. Purposeful classroom and co-curricular activities relate course content to real world issues and events.</td>
<td>Problem- or project-based assignments; discussion and dialogue in classroom; small-group work; field study or service projects</td>
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<td>Faculty collaboration</td>
<td>Instructors work together on linking activities and assignments across subjects; share and develop effective pedagogy; and consult on their shared students.</td>
<td>Organized communication before and throughout the semester; professional development to support cross-course planning; team teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td>Within cohorts, students create meaningful peer networks that promote academic support and social bonding. Relationships between students and faculty are strengthened by faculty outreach and communication.</td>
<td>Cohorts; study groups or group projects; informal social events; outreach by faculty; faculty communication about shared students; field trips</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration of student support services</td>
<td>Knowledge and use of campus resources that provide extra academic support. These services are integrated with classroom activities.</td>
<td>Student success courses; tutoring or supplementation instruction; dedicated counselor; classroom discussion of available campus resources; library training; access to technology</td>
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Curricular Integration

Proponents of learning communities often stress that linking two or more classes helps students see the connections between what they are learning in each course in the learning community, and between academic learning and their own sociopolitical experiences. Curricular integration refers to course material that is tied together in such a way as to reveal those connections and stimulate students to think creatively and critically about the material. Accord-
ing to Gabelnick, curricular integration allows students to “reconceptualize social, economic, political and multicultural issues” and draw more meaning from academic learning.\(^3\)

Examples of curricular integration in learning communities are:

- Overarching themes or names for the learning community
- Synchronized course calendars
- Aligned readings
- Joint assignments
- Shared grading for joint assignments
- Long-term projects integrating material from each class
- Team teaching

**Active, Collaborative Learning**

Proponents of learning communities typically encourage teaching that pushes students to engage more actively with the material and with each other in intellectual discourse. According to Bonwell and Eison, active learning is “any class activity that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing.”\(^4\) Hurd suggests a connection between this kind of learning and academic achievement.\(^5\) Teachers using this approach, for example, might ask students to reflect critically on readings and write about their own response to those readings.\(^6\)

Examples of strategies to encourage active learning in learning communities are:

- Class discussion
- Presentations (individual or group)
- Reflective writing
- Long-term projects integrating material from each class

\(^3\)Gabelnick (1997), quoted in Minkler (2002).
\(^5\)Hurd (2000).
\(^6\)Braxton, Miler, and Sullivan (2000).
- Service learning projects
- Field trips and other extracurricular activities

Cooperative or collaborative learning is a subset of active learning and is emphasized often by Tinto in his discussions of student engagement. According to Johnson and Johnson, cooperative learning has four essential components: (1) positive interdependence, in which all group members participate to achieve the group goal; (2) individual accountability, in which each member of the group is held responsible for his or her own learning, which in turn contributes to the group goal; (3) cooperation, in which students discuss, problem-solve, and collaborate together; and (4) evaluation, in which members of the group review and evaluate their ability to work together effectively and to make changes as needed.

Examples of strategies to encourage collaborative learning are:
- Group or team projects
- Peer evaluations
- Grades assigned to work performed by teams rather than by individuals
- Faculty collaboration

According to learning community proponents, for curricular integration to take place in learning communities, faculty who teach the linked courses (typically two faculty members, one per course) need to work together to include practices that incorporate integrative, active, and collaborative learning techniques such as those described above. The frequency with which faculty meet to plan and conduct their learning communities can vary, as can the mode of communication (for example, face-to-face meetings versus e-mail exchanges), but significant collaboration before and during the semester is considered to be necessary for integrative teaching — that is, instructional strategies that encourage students to see connections between disciplines and between academic learning and personal experiences. Some faculty also choose to underscore and strengthen the curricular connection between their courses by sitting in on each other's classes or team-teaching both courses.

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7 Service learning is a strategy that integrates instructional and community service to encourage civic participation while benefiting the communities.
8 Engstrom and Tinto (2008); Tinto (1997).
10 Throughout this report, the word “faculty” is used to refer to both full- and part-time instructors.