11-30-2016

Editorial

Emily Lardner
The Evergreen State College, lardnere@evergreen.edu

Editorial

Abstract

From the National Learning Communities conference to practices in the field, we continue to improve our teaching and learning.

The National Learning Communities Conference, hosted by Kennesaw State University in November 2016, provided a glimpse into our field. The ninety-plus sessions focused on learning community structures, pedagogical practices, organizational change, and assessment at all levels. Speakers came from two-year colleges, four year independent colleges, four year public colleges and universities. Across the diversity of our institutions and our learning community programs, what holds us together as a field is our belief that we can use learning communities, in a variety of forms, to improve the quality of students' experiences of learning. We do our work with a fierce commitment to our students, and a willingness to learn from both research and practice how better to offer our programs. The articles in this issue are similarly grounded in a commitment to improving the quality of students' experiences, even as they tackle learning community practice from different angles.

The research article, a qualitative study conducted by Gabrielle Kahn, Chris Calienes and Tara A. Thompson, builds on earlier work in our field and represents a milestone in learning community program assessment. Their article, "A Dynamic Program Assessment Framework for Learning Communities," was inspired by arguments advanced for the use of the "Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol" (PRP) made by the team of Gillies Malnarich, Maureen Pettit, and Jack Mino in their 2014 LCRP article, "Washington Center's online student survey validation study: Surfacing students' individual and collective understanding of their learning communities experiences." Malnarich, Pettitt, and Mino argued that learning community assessment has for too long been enacted in an individualized form, even while learning community structures foreground opportunities for collaborative work. As part of their validation study, they designed the PRP which teaching teams could use to help students reflect on their experiences of integrative learning together.

Kahn, Calienes and Thompson are the first scholars to take up this work. They adapted the PRP for their program, the English as a Second Language (ESL) Learning Communities at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY, because it was philosophically congruent with the sociocultural theoretical principles grounding their LC program foundation. They wanted to find out how well the program was working, and learn from students how they might make it more effective. As they put it, "could assessment be instantiated as a cooperative dialogue that provides learning opportunities for students, teachers, and administrators to best meet students' needs at a programmatic level?" Their article describes their method for engaging in dynamic program assessment, as well as their findings. One tantalizing glimpse into what they learned, however, is

captured here: "while students had positive things to say about collaboration in their individually produced written work…(they) seemed more concerned with saying the 'right' thing to an academic audience than in probing more complex aspects of their LC participation." We hope the article by Kahn, Calienes and Thompson will catalyze work on other campuses with versions of dynamic program assessment that invite students in as collaborative partners.

The two practice articles in this issue address issues that arise in familiar contexts. Michael J. Stebelton and Rashné Jehangir, from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, describe their redesigned first year experience (FYE) program for students in the College of Education and Human Development. The new FYE program is two semesters long. In the second semester, students enroll in linked courses; in the fall, students enroll in a First Year Inquiry (FYI) course which is structured as linked-course model where all of the activity occurs within a single course. The FYI course is divided into thematic and discipline specific sections, and each section enrolls between 75-115 students. The sections are taught by faculty teams, who meet with smaller seminar groups twice a week and with the cohort as a whole once a week. Stebleton and Jehangir describe the common features of the FYI sections: they are writing intensive, include a common book, and are explicitly interdisciplinary in nature. They also connect students with significant co-curricular opportunities, and beginning in 2010, all students in the FYI participated in an iPad initiative. After reviewing their assessment results, Stebelton and Jehangir argue that all learning community programs need to work on encouraging collective ownership so as to avoid burn-out among faculty and staff. They also recommend that learning community practitioners remain flexible about models while staying focused on adapting high-impact and educationally effective practices to creating curriculum that meets the needs of historically underserved student populations.

In the other practice article, Jeffrey S. Coker and Paula Patch from Elon University also focus on institutional sustainability, as they review the lessons they learned as they scaled up their residentially linked courses over a five-year period. As they put it, the scale-up was not administratively driven but rather, "the origins of the scale-up are better explained by collaborative discussions between the academic and student life sides of the university about how learning communities could be better utilized across campus." The scale-up effort grew out of an experiment at Elon in 2010-2011 which compared the results of linked courses, courses linked to a residence area, and courses linked to a themed residence hall. All were positive, but the results of the courses linked to residence areas were

especially positive. Thus, the work described in this article began as the courses linked to residence areas were brought to scale. Coker and Patch offer five clear lessons for other campuses working on scaling residential learning communities.

The two perspective pieces in this issue represent two slices of learning community realities on campuses. In "Value Added: Learning Communities, Experiential Process and Student Engagement in Lifelong Learning in the Culinary Arts," Thomas J. Smyth reflects on the power of a learning community that combines culinary arts, Spanish language instruction, and Latin American culture. This program, that embraces the realities of working in an urban kitchen, demonstrates the wonderfully innovative thinking about curriculum and pedagogy that characterizes the best of our field of practice. Jamie Workman and Lyn Redington offer a sobering contrast in their perspective on institutional change. "Developing a comprehensive learning community program: navigating change through shifting institutional priorities" is the third of a three-part series, and it describes the struggle to achieve campus-wide agreement on the value of a learning community program.

As a set, these five articles represent a rich portrait of our evolving field. Kahn, Calienes and Thompson invite us to push our program assessment practices to include the collaborative, meaning-making process so central to learning communities, and make our assessment practices theoretically congruent with the educational theories behind our programs. Stebelton and Jehangir demonstrate that it's possible to design a learning community experience for students in spite of institutional constraints by focusing on educationally engaging practices. Coker and Patch make a similar argument, although they are working in a different institutional context, as they share what they've learned about the process of scaling up a residential learning community program. Smyth reminds us of the imaginative possibilities for curriculum design within learning communities, along with the rewards for students. Workman and Redington provide a sobering counterpoint with their reflections on the unraveling of a learning community program. This is the work we do, and the strands of it are complex, reaching from assessment through the classroom to institutional sustainability, all with the aim of improving the quality of students' experiences.

Critical to the publication of this issue of the journal is the work of the twenty reviewers who helped writers see the possibilities within their initial articles. Thanks to all of you, and to the writers who continue to submit your articles. This journal belongs to all of you.
--Emily Lardner for the editorial team