

2019

Notes for this Issue

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Recommended Citation

Kahn, G. , Graziano, J. (2019). Notes for this Issue. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 7(2), Article 1.

Available at: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol7/iss2/1>

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Abstract

Foundational to the learning community movement is a view of teaching and learning as a collaborative experience. The articles in this issue ask us to consider new ways we might understand and enact collaboration in our learning community research and practice.

The learning community mission and movement are grounded in a view of teaching and learning as a collaborative enterprise. Intentionally restructuring time and credits to counter the fragmentation inherent in typical higher education models, learning community practitioners understand that a sense of belonging is critical to the learning activity (Fogarty, Dunlap, & others, 2003; MacGregor & Smith, 2005; Tinto, 1997). All of the articles in this issue point to the role of collaboration in our classrooms and programs and ask us to consider new ways we might work to build community.

Matthew Davis, in *Acquiring Social Capital: Conclusions from a Social Science Summer Bridge Community*, shows the value in bringing learning community participants together before the work of the semester begins. His research, examining social science students enrolled in a living learning community program, highlights how we might focus on social capital in our programs by encouraging opportunities “for students to build meaningful relationships with peers, mentors, and faculty.” Emphasizing the role of peer mentors and the exploration of spaces outside of the classroom, this study speaks to the work of administrators seeking to develop bridge programs as well as all learning community practitioners who aim to deepen interpersonal connections on their campuses.

In *Understanding the Impact of Learning Community Support for STEM Students with Low Mathematics Placement*, Ryan D. Sweeder, Merve N. Kursav, Samantha M. F. Cass, and Rebecca L. Matz investigate the impact of a STEM learning community at Lyman Briggs College. Cohort-building activities were designed to be part of the Instilling Quantitative and Integrative Reasoning (INQUIRE) program, and students indicated that the collaboration they experienced with other learners and faculty members helped their transition to college. This article, which combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods, emphasizes the challenges in improving graduation rates of at-risk student populations and also highlights the particular need for supportive programs in STEM fields that promote students’ personal and academic growth through community.

In *Transfer Student Success: Yet More Support for Learning Communities*, Charisse T.M. Coston found that transfer Criminal Justice students who participated in learning communities performed better in core classes and graduated earlier than demographically comparable transfer students who did not. By surveying the learning community group, the author identified a number of stressors experienced by transfer students, in particular, and argue for additional supports, such as learning communities, for this vulnerable population.

Charles T. Wynn, Herman Ray, and Liyuan Liu, the authors of *The Relationship between Metacognitive Reflection, PBL, and Postformal Thinking among First-Year Learning Community Students*, argue for the inclusion of integrative problem-based learning experiences in our learning community classrooms. The authors note that the problem-based learning method can promote first-year students’ engagement in “a true community of learners” as they open their minds to new ways of thinking and reflecting on the diverse opinions of others. By taking an intentional approach to the content we cover in our disciplines, the authors argue, we may work with students to apply new ways of thinking in the relational spaces of their learning communities so that they may engage in such activity independently.

As Finley and McNair (2013) remind us, learning communities, as a high-impact practice, provide students opportunities to “incorporate their lived experiences into their learning, and participate in support networks” (p. 29). Karen Goodlad, Sandra Cheng, Jennifer Sears, Mery Diaz, Ashwin Satyanarayana, and Philip Kreniske underscore the value of these learning community features by adding a digital reflective writing component to their program model at

New York City College of Technology. Their article, *Our Stories: First-year Learning Communities Students Reflections on the Transition to College*, shows how this pairing of pedagogies not only gives students voice but informs program development.

The Lasting Effects of Learning Communities, by Emily E. Virtue, Gayle Maddox, and Ken Pfaff, includes data from juniors and seniors reflecting on their first-year learning community program experiences. Finding that the peer dynamics of their learning community classrooms resonated with students years later, the authors prompt us to think more deeply about how we might encourage the development of lasting relationships through our curriculum design and in our activity implementation.

As a field, we have always valued social connections in the learning process, structuring our programs to build community in student cohorts. The articles in this issue not only confirm the success of this model for learning across a range of populations and programs, they also remind us how much we might still learn about the role of relationship building in enriching the experiences of learning community program participants. We invite you to find inspiration in how we can continue to do the work of community in our research and practice.

References

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