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## What Campuses Assess When They Assess Their Learning Community Programs: Selected Findings from a National Survey of Learning Community Programs

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# What Campuses Assess When They Assess Their Learning Community Programs: Selected Findings from a National Survey of Learning Community Programs

## **Abstract**

In spring 2013, the Washington Center administered a national survey to find what campuses assessed when they assessed their learning community programs, how they assessed those outcomes, and what they did with the results. Sixty-six campuses responded to the survey. Most campuses assess at least one measure of student success (pass rates, course completion, GPA) during students' learning community enrollment. Some campuses track student success after their learning community enrollment, and more campuses would like to if they had the means to do so. Nearly all campuses assess student engagement, and the few campuses that do not would like to. About half the campuses responding to the survey assess integrative and interdisciplinary learning. Most campuses associate teaching in learning communities with professional development benefits, and nearly all associate the learning community program with achieving key institutional outcomes. Discussion of these results highlights potential areas for further work in order to strengthen practice across the field of learning community practice.

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## **Keywords**

learning community program assessment, assessment, professional development, institutional change

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Thanks to my colleagues, Gillies Malnrich and Rachel Burke at the Washington Center, and Maureen Pettitt at Skagit Valley College, who helped to design this survey.

Learning community programs done well function as an intervention strategy aimed at improving student success. An equally compelling case has been made that, by implementing learning communities, we contribute to the broader efforts to make our colleges and universities more focused on student success, more inclusive, more collaborative, and more attuned to using data to inform decisions. Results from a national survey of learning community program assessment tools administered by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education (Washington Center) show that as a field, we understand learning community programs in both ways. We expect learning community programs to increase student success; we also expect learning community programs to help change our institutions.

In the spring of 2013, the Washington Center invited practitioners across the country to respond to an online survey that asked about outcomes associated with students participating in learning communities, faculty and staff who teach in the learning community program, and the institution. In addition, the survey asked respondents how they assessed those outcomes, how they used the information, and what they would like to assess if they had tools for doing so. The survey also asked for descriptive information about the learning community program.

The purpose of this article is to report on what learning community programs are assessing, the tools and strategies used to assess those outcomes, and the ways that information from the assessments is being used. It also suggests some implications for our collective practice as we work on strengthening the field of learning community work across institutions.

### **Rationale for the Survey: Why This Focus, and Why Now?**

The impetus for designing a survey to learn how campuses assess their learning community programs grew out of an earlier project that also focused on assessment. In 2006, the Washington Center launched the National Program on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities (NPALLC) to address a gap in the literature, namely, the kind of learning that learning communities made possible. Claims were made that learning communities promoted integrative and interdisciplinary thinking, but evidence in support of those claims was sparse. Consequently, the Washington Center organized an action research project to look at samples of student work produced in response to learning community assignments.

The approach used to assess students' work was grounded in research about how to determine the quality of interdisciplinary integration (Boix-Mansilla, 2005; Boix-Mansilla & Dawes Duraisingh, 2007; Boix-Mansilla & Gardner, 2003). Participants in NPALLC looked at student work together, using a common tool called "the collaborative assessment protocol," which is structured around Boix-Mansilla's (2007) description of disciplinary grounding and "interdisciplinary leveraging." Project participants also used a common heuristic for designing integrative or interdisciplinary assignments (Malnarich & Lardner, 2003). Results of the project have been disseminated in multiple ways, including the publication of a double issue of the *Journal of Learning Communities*

*Research* (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008-2009), multiple conference and campus presentations, and the Washington Center website.<sup>1</sup>

The success of this grass-roots project led participants to propose another round of action research, this time focused on how campuses assess not just student learning but also learning community programs overall. In brief, the idea was to identify a handful of promising assessment tools, solicit applications from campuses willing to experiment with using the common tools, organize gatherings for teams to learn from each other, and develop presentations and publications to disseminate the results.

This idea has a precedent. In 1998, the Association for Integrative Studies (AIS) established a task force to find out how (and whether) member institutions were assessing their interdisciplinary programs, and then, based on the results, to offer suggestions to strengthen the field. In their summary of three and a half years of work by the AIS Assessment Committee, Stowe and Eder (2002) assert that many interdisciplinary programs “were ‘caught up’ in some sort of external mandate to implement an assessment strategy, and these programs were eager for thoughtful advice” (p. 3). In spite of the mandate for program assessment, Stowe and Eder found that “actual implementation of a viable assessment plan remains a challenge” (p. 3). They also noted that the absence of a common definition for the key term “interdisciplinary” made, assessment even more challenging.

A decade after the AIS project began, campus teams involved in NPALLC found the idea of pooling resources to improve learning community program assessment attractive. However, after a series of formal and informal conversations with learning community leaders from a variety of campuses, it became clear that a program assessment project needed to start in a different place. Rather than invite campuses to explore the use of a common set of assessment tools together, we needed first to find out what tools campuses were using and why, and prior to that, we needed to learn which outcomes campuses were associating with their learning community programs to begin with. Hence, this survey.

### **What Campuses Assess When They Assess: Survey Design**

The Learning Community Program Assessment Tools Survey (Assessment Tools Survey) has two parts. Like the other Washington Center survey, the Online Survey of Students’ Experience of Learning in Learning Communities (Online Student Survey), the first section of this survey was designed to collect demographic information about learning community programs responding, including program longevity and size, the mission of the LC program, the types of learning communities offered (i.e. linked classes, first year programs, living-learning communities), and the focus of the learning community program (i.e. general education, pre-college, majors, honors).

### **Outcomes for students, teachers, and the institution**

The new section of the survey was designed to collect information about outcomes for students, teachers, and the institution. In drafting the questions for the survey, we

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/projects/assesslrng.html> for more information, including sample assignments from the project.

reviewed existing surveys and consulted widely with colleagues in the field.<sup>2</sup> Our early work was informed by “Exploring Impact: A Survey of Participants in the CASTL Institutional Leadership and Affiliates Program” (Ciccone, Huber, Hutchings, & Cambridge, 2009) as well as developmental evaluation work we were doing with Derek Price for Kingsborough Community College’s FIPSE-funded Jigsaw Project, which focused on institutional change.<sup>3</sup> The final questions were shaped by feedback we received at several state and national meetings.

Because a strong argument for learning community programs is that they can be used as a strategy to increase student success, we developed a series of questions focused on student outcomes. We asked specifically about course completion rates, pass rates, and grade point averages while students were in the LC. We also asked whether campuses tracked any of those measures or degree/certificate attainment after the LC experience. Learning communities are strongly associated with increased student engagement, thanks in large part to the work of Kuh (2008) and others in identifying learning communities as a high impact practice. We asked whether campuses assess student engagement, and if they did, how they assessed it, and what they did with the results. Given the strong association between learning communities and integrative and interdisciplinary learning, we also asked whether campuses assessed this aspect of student learning and, if so, how and for what purpose.

Another rationale for learning communities is that they help bring about educational reform: learning communities done well help us make our institutions work better for students. This argument was clearly made by Washington Center’s founding directors, Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor, and their colleagues Roberta Matthews and Faith Gabelnick (1990, 2004). Underscoring what they were hearing from learning community practitioners across the country, Smith et al. argue that teaching in a learning community with colleagues provided opportunities for professional learning.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, they claim, learning communities function as “skunk works”—research and development sites for curriculum development and the strengthening of teaching and learning for the college as a whole.

To probe the degree to which campuses associated learning communities with these wider-ranging benefits, we designed two related sets of questions. Building on colleagues’ suggestions, we asked campuses whether the learning community program was associated with specific outcomes for faculty and staff teaching in the program. Using a four point scale (not at all, a little, some, or quite a bit), respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which learning community teaching was associated with the following four items: expanded pedagogical strategies; knowledge of other disciplines; increased intellectual engagement in teaching; and increased collaboration among faculty and staff.

The Assessment Tools Survey also asked whether the learning community program was associated with institutional outcomes. Using the same four-point scale, respondents

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<sup>2</sup> The team that designed the survey included Gillies Malnarich and Rachel Burke from Washington Center, and Maureen Pettitt, of Skagit Valley College.

<sup>3</sup> Information about CASTL is also available in Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone (2011), Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Moore, MacGregor & Lindblad (2003) make a similar argument, describing four dissertations written between 1990 and 2003 that focused on the professional development benefits accruing to faculty teaching in learning communities.

were asked to indicate the degree to which the learning community program contributed to the following institutional outcomes: a shared focus on student success; increased collaboration between student services and academic affairs; a shared focus on student learning tied to effective teaching; and a shared understanding of the campus vision, mission and/or purpose. These questions reflect a synthesis of what we heard from colleagues and the current best thinking in the Washington Center about how learning communities become a means of institutional change: they must be framed as a student success initiative that maps onto the institution’s purpose so they are relevant; they require effective collaboration across divisions, particularly between student affairs and academic affairs; and they assume a strong relationship between teaching and learning—in other words, that what gets taught and how it gets taught have a direct influence on student learning.

Finally, a link to the survey was sent to the Learncom listserv, campus leads for teams that attended the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities, leads in regional and statewide learning community networks, and others on the Washington Center distribution list.

The discussion that follows describes results of the section of survey that focused on learning community program assessment: what campuses assess, how they assess it, what they do with those assessment results, and what they would like to assess if they had tools for doing so. It provides a window, for the first time, into how sixty-six campuses (twenty-one two-year colleges, twenty-one independent colleges and universities, and twenty-four public universities) assess their learning community programs and points out some implications for our work as a field.

### **What We Assess: Student Success**

As expected, most learning community programs track one or more measures of student success. (See Appendix A for an overview of student outcomes assessed by responding campuses.) The majority of community colleges track course completion and pass rates, and the majority of four-year programs—public and private—track GPA (see table 1 below).

**Table 1**  
**Measures of Student Success**

<b>During LC enrollment</b>	<b>2-year colleges</b>	<b>4-year independents</b>	<b>4-year publics</b>
<b>Track course completion</b>	15 of 21 (71%)	7 of 21 (33%)	8 of 24 (33%)
<b>Track pass rates</b>	14 of 21 (67%)	8 of 21 (38%)	7 of 24 (29%)
<b>Track GPA</b>	8 of 21 (39%)	13 of 21 (62%)	21 of 24 (88%)

Most of the campuses that indicated how they collect information on student success reported using information systems or student record systems, often in collaboration with institutional research or institutional effectiveness offices. Several respondents described going through records or transcripts by hand. One respondent

described creating a spreadsheet to keep track of LC students and updating it annually. Another reported that the lead faculty for each LC or LLC was charged with pulling data for the students in that LC/LLC.

The primary use of student success data was to make comparisons with students not enrolled in LCs and, secondarily, to target areas for program improvement. Community colleges reported using information on course completion rates within LCs to legitimize their LC programs. Multiple community colleges reported comparing success rates in courses taught as part of LCs with success rates for the same course taught on its own. Several used the information to see whether some courses fit better in an LC than others. Some community college respondents described sharing this information with LC faculty. Several community colleges reported comparing groups of students, for example, the success rates for first time in college students (FTICs) who enroll in a learning community with success rates for FTICs in stand alone courses.

Grade point average was the key student success measure reported in the four-year public university context. University respondents reported using GPA to set up cohort comparisons between LC and other first-time students and to compare LLC and non-LLC students. Universities also reported comparing GPA across LC cohorts. One campus described their practice of controlling for entering student characteristics such as high school GPA, ACT score, and first generation status in order to compare the cumulative GPA of LC and non-LC students. University respondents reported using information on LC student GPA to keep the program funded, to market the program to new students, and to boost the morale of faculty teaching in the program. Several universities reported using GPA information to identify students in need of academic support and to establish students' eligibility for certificates. One campus described looking at the percentage of students in each freshmen cohort who earned a 2.0 GPA or lower in order to review the curriculum and activities provided through the freshmen seminar course. The same program also tracks students' level of involvement in the LC and its relationship to overall GPA. Another campus reported looking for trends to determine whether some LCs have higher or lower D/W/F rates and to make necessary adjustments (i.e. different pairings).

Grade point average was the student success measure tracked by most independent colleges and universities. Respondents from independent four-years reported using GPA to compare LC/LLC and non-LC/LLC student performance. One campus reported using GPA and retention rates to look at the different outcomes for students who do service learning/civic engagement projects within their learning communities compared with students who engage in field-based learning. Another campus reported looking at the relationship between expected and actual GPA for students within the LC program and comparing that with the expected and actual GPA for students not in the LC program. A key purpose for this assessment at that institution was to provide support for students who are floundering.

Campuses of all types also assess student graduation and certificate completion, but to a lesser degree. Table 2 below shows that more than half the two-year colleges and public universities responding to the survey track students' progress towards their degrees once they leave the learning community program.

**Table 2**  
**Post LC Measures Tracked**

<b>Post LC Enrollment</b>	<b>2-year colleges</b>	<b>4-year independents</b>	<b>4-year publics</b>
<b>Track progress</b>	13 of 21 (62%)	6 of 21 (29%)	16 of 24 (67%)
<b>Track certificate/degree completion</b>	14 of 21 (67%)	8 of 21 (38%)	14 of 24 (58%)

While there is some debate in the field about whether it is reasonable to expect a single or even two-term experience in students' first year to lead to higher graduation rates, 27 of the 66 campus respondents would like to track degree or certificate completion if they had the tools to do so.

*Student engagement—the commonly assessed outcome*

In the past fifteen years, the concept of student engagement has gained wide traction as a way of thinking about—and measuring—the effectiveness of our educational programs. Kinzie (2014) argues succinctly that the most important aspect of student engagement is that it “involves the intersection of student behaviors *and* institutional conditions” (p. 23)—in other words, student engagement combines a focus on what students are doing, their behaviors and involvement in learning, and the educational structures and practices present and supported on campuses. The rapid rise of student engagement as a way to assess student learning may be because it captures this relational aspect of learning.

Consistent with national trends, student engagement was the outcome most associated with LC programs across institutional types: 67% of community colleges, 71% of independent colleges and universities, and 83% of public universities assess student engagement. (See table 3 below.) The campuses that do not assess student engagement currently would like to if they had an appropriate tool for doing so.

**Table 3**  
**Assess Student Engagement**

<b>During LC enrollment</b>	<b>2-year colleges</b>	<b>4-year independents</b>	<b>4-year publics</b>
<b>Track student engagement</b>	14 of 21 (67%)	15 of 21 (71%)	20 of 24 (83%)

Campuses use a variety of methods to assess student engagement, primarily surveys. Two-year campuses reported using the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), CCSSE-like surveys developed in-house, surveys tied specifically to campus LC program outcomes, and the Online Student Survey. Four-year campuses reported using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), in-house surveys, questions added to course evaluations, and the Online Student Survey. A few campuses



reported using tools other than surveys to assess student engagement, including student focus groups, class visits, short reflection exercises, and small group instructional diagnosis (SGIDs).

#### *Uses of information about student engagement*

Information about student engagement in learning communities is used in two broad ways: to improve the program and to market it to internal and external stakeholders. Thirty of the forty-nine campuses that assess student engagement explicitly described using that information to improve their LC programs.

Campuses are using information on student engagement to improve their practice in a variety of ways, ranging from giving feedback to specific instructors and revising LC program engagement activities to improving the curriculum and the programming for the program overall to planning future LLCs and LCs. As one respondent wrote, “individual teaching teams and the LC committee use this data to find out what’s working and determine how best to improve the learning communities.” Another person described using their assessment information to “identify student engagement in practices associated with ‘deep learning’ and to improve the quality and frequency of those opportunities.” On several campuses, information about student engagement is shared at annual professional development days, where it serves as a topic of conversation and the basis for program planning. At another campus, the primary audience for data on engagement was the office responsible for learning community programs as a way to check on program effectiveness, and they use also used it for planning.

Survey respondents use their data on student engagement not only to improve their programs but also to prove that they are working and to “market” the LC program. Respondents described comparing their data with other schools and within the school, comparing LC and non-LC students. One person described sharing their data during professional development days to encourage faculty to get involved with the program. Another described using information gleaned from student surveys to market the program to the campus community and in particular to “show they are using money wisely.”

#### *Implications for campus practice*

That twenty-seven of sixty-six campuses explicitly report using information on student engagement to improve their learning community programs is heartening. As Huerta and Hansen (2013) argue, discussing assessment results drives learning community program improvement and fundamental institutional change. The number of campuses that currently discuss what they have learned about student engagement in their LC programs reflects widespread understanding of this. However, as Stowe and Eder (2002) pointed out in their account of interdisciplinary program assessment over a decade ago, “the single biggest acknowledged failure of assessment, both in terms of its performance and being taken seriously by skeptics, is the absent application of relevant, timely feedback from otherwise noble expenditures of time, energy and resources” (p. 97). In other words, as with any outcome, assessing student engagement without using the results to improve our LC programs isn’t good enough. We need to develop a standard of practice as a field where all learning community programs use their assessments of student engagement to improve teaching, planning, and program delivery.

That seems like a reasonable goal, given the widespread agreement that engagement is worth assessing.

### **Integrative and interdisciplinary learning—a challenge**

Learning communities have historically been associated with interdisciplinary work. Early champions advocated for them as places where, as Patrick Hill (1985) put it at the inaugural learning communities conference at the Washington Center, “the fundamental structural move is to link related enterprises and to make structural changes which release, for faculties and students, the powers of human association.” In that speech, Hill argued that learning community instructors needed to educate students who will be “expert enough” to participate in decisions as part of a larger collaborative team, expert enough to act as engaged citizens—expert integrative and interdisciplinary thinkers.

Integrative learning has a distinctive trajectory within higher education, separate from learning communities. DeZure, Babb, and Waldmann (2005) describe the response that occurred when the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) issued a call to campuses to participate in a new national project to investigate and promote integrative learning in undergraduate education—139 campuses responded, applying for the ten available slots. Seventy percent of the proposed projects focused on assessment, and sixty-three percent identified faculty development as their focus. As Huber, Hutchings, and Gale (2005) put it in their essay in that same issue, “the capacity for integrative thinking—for connection making—has come to be recognized as an important learning outcomes in its own right, not simply a hoped-for consequence of the mix of experience that constitute undergraduate education.”

In spite of the argument that learning communities are uniquely designed to promote this kind of learning, fewer than half of the survey respondents assess integrative or interdisciplinary learning. Of the campuses responding to the survey, close to half of the independent colleges and universities assess this outcome. Nearly half of public universities and about a third of the two-year college respondents assess it. (See table 4 below.)

**Table 4**  
Assess integrative and interdisciplinary learning

<b>During LC enrollment</b>	<b>2-year colleges</b>	<b>4-year independents</b>	<b>4-year publics</b>
<b>Students’ integrative or interdisciplinary learning</b>	7 of 21 (33%)	10 of 21 (48%)	16 of 24 (42%)

#### *How campuses assess integrative and interdisciplinary learning*

Independent colleges and universities use a variety of methods to assess students’ integrative/interdisciplinary learning. One respondent mentioned adding a question to a supplementary evaluation for LC students. Another described giving students a survey that asked them to reflect on how the two disciplines and the linked classes connected.

One campus uses the Online Student Survey. Two respondents mentioned using portfolios—one program currently uses them and one plans to implement them in 2015-2016. Four schools mentioned using some form of student work: common or shared assignments, a common rubric, and journal assignments. Another respondent mentioned that in their program, each learning community is asked to build in its own assessment to determine whether the integrative learning goal is met; according to this respondent, they have not “done very much yet” to see that this actually happens.

Three of the public university respondents said they use surveys to assess integrative learning. Seven respondents described using student work—course assignments, end of program artifacts like posters or personal assessments, and journal assignments. Two respondents described using the Integrative and Applied Learning VALUE rubric (AAC&U, n.d.). At one school, faculty teams were about to start using the VALUE rubric to assess their own students’ work, with the intent of using the results to inform future faculty development focused on integrative learning. At the other school, teaching teams already use the VALUE rubric to assess their students, and the program was about to implement a process in which faculty would submit randomized samples of student work to be evaluated anonymously by three additional people. This randomized assessment of student work would be used to set benchmarks for improvement.

Among the community colleges that assess integrative and interdisciplinary learning, one campus mentioned using the Online Student Survey. Two respondents described using a common rubric to assess assignments. One of these schools has an integrative learning outcome tied to its LC program. Two additional schools reported that they use integrative assignments collected by faculty, and one campus has also begun to collect reflections from faculty about this work.

### *Implications for campus practice*

Both integrative and interdisciplinary learning are strongly associated with learning communities, but, as suggested by these survey results, our collective assessment practice with respect to this outcome is lagging. Part of the reason may be that our definitions of the terms are murky—integrative and interdisciplinary learning are not equivalent terms.<sup>5</sup> In addition, two of the current tools available to assess these outcomes, the collaborative assessment protocol used in NPALLC and the AACU VALUE rubric, require significant investments of time to use well, and the collaborative assessment protocol assumes a level of disciplinary grounding that isn’t necessarily appropriate for all learning community assignments.

These survey results suggest a strong need for more conversations about this particular learning outcome, including more clarification about the differences between integrative and interdisciplinary learning and the development of more readily accessible tools and practices for directly assessing student work. Dunlap and Pettitt (2013) have described Skagit Valley College’s work to define and assess integrative learning within the context of their learning community program, including strategies for holding important conversations focused on reaching a common understanding of that outcome. Smith and Mamerow (2013) have described multiple strategies used to assess and

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<sup>5</sup> NPALLC participants resolved this puzzle by framing interdisciplinary work as a particular kind of integration and making the case that, while all LC programs should aim to foster integrative learning, only some LCs are designed to support interdisciplinary work.

strengthen the First Year Interest Group Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, including surveys and focus groups with students and faculty about their experiences with integrated learning. And Huerta and Sperry (2013) have described the development of a systematic method for measuring student learning at the classroom level and then aggregating results across learning community offerings at Texas A&M Corpus Christi. As a field, we can build on these examples, but these survey results suggest we need more documentation and discussion about the ways learning community programs make space for messy conversations about shared assignments and the student work that results from them.

While we have work to do around this outcome, these survey results provide a foundation worth building on. Specifically designed survey questions that prompt students to reflect on making connections across courses are useful, and they are relatively easy to administer. Another relatively simple strategy used by one of the independent colleges in this survey requires faculty who propose a learning community to complete a worksheet describing how the learning community will link the two disciplines, including the joint activities that are planned to help students meet those goals. Implementing direct assessments of students' integrative and interdisciplinary learning is challenging because it requires time for instructors to meet together, so it's also encouraging that some campuses report making time to look at student work together.

Time may be the most challenging aspect of getting more faculty and staff involved in conversations about integrative and interdisciplinary learning—time to talk about the assignments we design to prompt it, the student work produced in response to those assignments, our strategies for responding to students, and our reflections on how to make our assignments work better. Mullin (2008) argues that processes of faculty learning are too often short-circuited under time pressures, as campuses default to old pedagogical models where faculty attend workshops together, get new material, but are expected somehow to process potential ways of using that material on their own. Moreover, even when space for conversation is created, the conversations that ensue can be difficult. Friedow, Blankenship, Green and Stroup (2012) describe their process of designing interdisciplinary assignments together like this: “things got messy, and the process was at times frustrating, (and) we believe that these and other challenges will be present in the process of developing goals and collaborating while designing interdisciplinary curricula” (p. 415). As Nowacek (2009) points out, conversations about shared assignments demand a level of comfort in surfacing differences—in terms of individual teaching preferences and in terms of disciplinary differences. Time for these rich and messy conversations may be in short supply, but just as we learn to make time for students to actively engage in our classes, so too must we find time for faculty engagement in questions related to teaching and learning.

### **Outcomes Associated with Teaching in LCs**

Survey respondents indicated that they associate teaching in learning communities with professional development benefits. Community college respondents made the highest associations between teaching in learning communities and benefits for learning community instructors, followed by independent colleges and universities and then the

public four-year institutions. The one exception was the matter of increased collaboration among faculty or between faculty and staff. On that particular indicator, the majority of both independent colleges and universities and community colleges reported making some or quite a bit of an association between teaching a learning community and increased collaboration among faculty or between faculty and staff. Half of the public universities made the same association.

All three types of institutions associated increased intellectual engagement in teaching with teaching in a learning community. Most community colleges and independent colleges and universities associated expanded pedagogical strategies with teaching in learning communities. Slightly less than half of the public universities reported making that level of association. Only in community colleges did more than half the respondents associate teaching in learning communities with increased knowledge of other disciplines by “some” or “quite a bit.” (See Table 5.)

**Table 5**  
**Outcomes associated “some” or “quite a bit” with teaching in LCs**

	<b>2-year colleges</b>	<b>4-year independents</b>	<b>4-year publics</b>
<b>Expanded pedagogical strategies</b>	81%	71%	46%
<b>Knowledge of other disciplines</b>	71%	38%	46%
<b>Increased intellectual engagement in teaching</b>	81%	62%	42%
<b>Increased collaboration among faculty or between faculty and staff</b>	86%	86%	50%

Despite the acknowledged relationship between teaching in learning communities and professional development benefits, many respondents reported that they did not formally or regularly assess these outcomes. Among the strategies campuses reported using were faculty discussions, focus groups, discussions between learning community teams and the learning community program leadership team, and surveys. One campus reported using observations. However, for the most part, these survey results suggest that the professional benefits that accrue to teaching in learning communities are assumed but not assessed. This represents a promising area for collective inquiry that could lead to a better understanding of when and how learning community teaching leads to professional learning for faculty and staff.

### **Learning communities associated with institutional outcomes**

The degree to which survey respondents believe that the learning community program on their campus contributes to institutional outcomes represents a potentially

promising focus of work for our field. Kezar (2014) argues that while some learning community programs remain relatively contained—self-enclosed innovative units that have only a limited impact on the broader campus—in other instances, learning community programs create opportunities for the people working in them to examine their norms and their values and engage productively with innovation (p. 197). In their study of community college faculty teaching in learning communities, Jackson, Stebleton, and Laanan (2013) found that teaching in a learning community “definitely promoted the importance of collaborating with professionals within and beyond one’s respective area” (p. 9). They also found that “learning community participation encouraged connection to the larger institution. By interacting with other faculty members through the learning community, faculty participants were able to realize how little they were involved in the institution beyond their respective areas” (p. 11). The results of this survey suggest that, within the field, our emphasis is expanding to include a focus on using learning communities as a strategy for implementing institutional change as well as a student success strategy.

The majority of four year colleges and universities, public and independent, and about two thirds of community colleges responding to the survey report that their learning community programs contribute “some” or “quite a bit” to a shared focus on student success. More than half of all respondents report that their learning community programs contribute “some” or “quite a bit” to increasing collaboration between student services and academic affairs. More than half of all respondents also report that their learning community programs contribute “some” or “quite a bit” to increasing a shared focus on student learning tied to effective teaching. Campuses of all types also report that learning community programs contribute to a shared focus on the institutional vision, mission and/or purpose: three fourths of independent colleges and universities, slightly more than half of community colleges, and just under half of public universities. (See table 6.)

**Table 6**  
**Extent to Which LC Programs Contribute “some” or “quite a bit” to Institutional Outcomes**

	<b>2-year colleges</b>	<b>4-year independents</b>	<b>4-year publics</b>
<b>Shared focus on student success</b>	67%	90%	79%
<b>Increased collaboration between student services and academic affairs</b>	57%	71%	67%
<b>Shared focus on student learning tied to effective teaching</b>	71%	57%	54%
<b>Shared understanding of campus mission, vision and/or purpose</b>	52%	76%	42%

Several campuses reported that the design of the learning community program itself is intended to foster the outcomes identified in this section of the survey. For example, one survey respondent from a two-year college wrote that “achieving a relatively balanced participation of academic affairs and student affairs staff on the LC program project team, and getting input on recruitment and marketing strategies from faculty and staff” are practices that enhance collaboration across the institution. These elements are built into their program design. Another community college respondent reported that “the central element of our collaboration is the Learning Community Committee. This committee assists the coordinator with maintaining the program, and the committee also offers LC faculty development.” A respondent from a public university wrote that their learning community program “models successful partnering.” In both these cases, membership on structured committees intentionally includes people from student services and academic affairs to foster collaboration.

Several campuses reported creating strategic alignments between learning community program outcomes and their institution’s outcomes. One community college respondent explained that “the learning community program outcomes are built to connect with the institutional mission and strategic plan.” Another respondent from a community college explained that not only are the learning community goals aligned with the college mission, institutional outcomes, and values, but also the process of proposing a learning community on that campus requires that faculty “explain the learning outcomes of the courses in the LC and their integrative curriculum ideas, and how their LC will appeal to and benefit students’ learning experiences. These proposals are reviewed by the project team, academic affairs and student affairs, who see whether the proposal aligns with the (program) goals.” Other campuses described similar processes in which learning community course proposals require instructors to articulate learning outcomes and show how those learning outcomes are aligned with institutional outcomes.

The results of this section of the survey bode well for students across our institutions. As a respondent from an independent college wrote, “our program was designed to provide students with a foundation for academic success, and to foster cross-department connections, student transitions, and familiarization with campus resources.” The more intentionally we engage in this work, the more likely it is that we will realize the full benefits of our learning community programs.

## **Conclusion**

Learning community practitioners are generous in sharing their ideas and resources with each other, and the respondents who filled out this survey were no exception. As a field, we expect learning communities to increase students’ pass rates, their course completion rates, and their GPA. To some extent, we keep track of students’ progress once they leave our learning community programs as well as their completion of degrees and certificates.

Across all campus types, we strongly associate participating in learning communities with increased student engagement. Nearly all of the respondents assess student engagement, and the majority of campuses are using this information in productive ways. As a field, we should aim to consistently use our assessments of student

engagement to improve our learning community programs, making this a core practice across institutional types. These survey results suggest this is a goal we could reach.

Across institutional types, fewer than half the campuses responding to this survey assess integrative and interdisciplinary learning, and even fewer are using direct assessments, looking at actual student work rather than at responses to survey questions. Here's a place where we need strong local, regional, and national advocacy for a change in our collective practice. The argument has been won in debates about the purpose of higher education, that is, integrative thinking is now identified as a critical skill. Learning community programs need to advance the claim that by design, they are places where students can become more skilled in exercising this particular habit of mind. However, to become better coaches of our students, we need to develop our own understanding of what integrative and interdisciplinary thinking looks like in practice, in students' work, and how we can design assignments that invite students to exercise these capacities. We need to time to talk and think together about our actual practices as teachers, and we need to continue to document our work so that others can learn from it.

We also need to foster the emerging conversation in our field about the ways in which designing, supporting, and sustaining learning community programs helps us become better institutional change agents—playing roles as team members and team leaders. The survey results suggest that we see this in our practice currently. Perhaps we can use the results of this survey to grow this critically important aspect of our work. Beyond that, we might choose to create space for conversations about other approaches to assessment, for instance, as Laufgraben and Shapiro (2004) suggest, collaborative assessment, needs assessments, process focused assessment, critical issues focused assessment—all of which can enhance our work, our institutions, and our students' learning.

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**Appendix A: Student Outcomes Assessed by Responding Campuses**

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	2-year colleges	4-year independents	4-year publics
<b>Course completion during LC</b>	71%	33%	33%
<b>Pass rates during LCs</b>	67%	38%	23%
<b>GPA during LC</b>	39%	62%	88%
<b>Progress post-LC enrollment</b>	62%	29%	67%
<b>Certificate or degree completion post LC</b>	20%	38%	58%
<b>Engagement during LC</b>	67%	71%	83%
<b>Integrative or interdisciplinary learning during LC</b>	33%	48%	42%

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