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It is Time to Count Learning Communities

Jean M. Henscheid

University of Idaho, jeanh@uidaho.edu

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It is Time to Count Learning Communities

Abstract

As the modern learning community movement turns 30, it is time to determine just how many, and what type, of these programs exist at America's colleges and universities. This article first offers a rationale for counting learning communities followed by a description of how disparate counts and unclear definitions hamper efforts to embed these programs ever more deeply into the fabric of higher education. Two "camps" of definitions are described as are existing national attempts to tally learning communities in each camp. The article concludes with recommendations that rely heavily on the collaborative spirit that animates learning communities. On its face, the (not so) simple act of counting may seem a labor-intensive sideline to the immediate task of supporting this work on individual campuses. This article makes the argument that undertaking a count aligns with efforts to improve the quality of this practice and is just the disciplined collective exercise the national movement needs as it enters its fourth decade.

Keywords

national learning communities movement, national surveys

Introduction

The impetus for this paper was the opportunity to finally collect the Buick I had “won” in 1999 from Drew Koch. Posing as a radio host, Drew (then of Purdue University, now with the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education) telephoned me to announce that I had won a new car. No arrangements were made until 2015 for me to collect my winnings. Via email this time, Drew (his true identity revealed) promised the car if I could answer one seemingly simple question: How many learning communities exist at American colleges and universities?

Earlier that year I had shared my impression with a second colleague that fewer curricular learning communities seemed to be following the traditional typology (e.g., a cohort of typically first-year students enrolled in at least two courses) identified in the mid-1980s by the Washington Center for the Improvement of the Quality of Undergraduate Education (the Washington Center). The exact number of institutions that house learning communities has actually been murky since the modern national movement was launched with the Washington Center in 1985. As described below, that murkiness may have been good, arising from the flexibility that distinguishes this powerful practice. What I know now is that it is hard to find any solid evidence that there are currently as many as the 800 traditionally defined learning communities reported to have existed in the early 2000s. The very loose consensus number from several sources seems closer to 500. With no illusions that I will ever see that Buick, I have thrown myself into answering Drew’s—and now my—question. After an intensive search I have concluded that (a) I don’t know the answer; (b) I don’t believe anyone does; and (c) it is time to count learning communities.

Why Count Now?

The reasons for counting learning communities have far more to do with enhancing student learning than they do with fixing perceived problems. In fact, the obsession with fixing problems that began with the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) report, *A Nation at Risk*, has done more to derail educational renewal than to improve learning (Berliner, 2013; Berliner & Briddle, 1995). In the 32 years since *A Nation at Risk*, factions in the education debate have fixated on blaming educational failures on multiple layers of government, teachers, administrators, citizens, and students and on devising remedies and reforms at the expense of holding prolonged and productive discussions about how to facilitate student learning. Even Patrick Hill, The Evergreen State College provost who introduced modern learning communities to the nation, felt

compelled just two years after *A Nation at Risk* to offer this innovation as a solution to “at least seven different issues” or “ills” (Hill, 1985, p. 1), including mismatched faculty and student expectations, goals, and attitudes; a lack of intellectual interaction between faculty and students; curricular incoherence; lack of resources for faculty development; increasingly complex social problems; student retention and completion rates, and shrinking budgets. Using problems as motivators of change can result in endless squabbles over which problems to fix and who is to blame and in the creation of programs that buckle under the weight of unrealistic expectations. The first answer to “Why Count Learning Communities Now?” is simply to clarify just how many and how well the nation’s postsecondary institutions are achieving Hill’s fundamental wish for these learning communities, which was:

to put people with related interests together and give them time and space—real time and real space—to learn from each other. You are releasing the capacity of people to learn from each other, and it is as simple as that, what we are after. (Hill, 1985, p. 4)

As an educational innovation that has attempted to maintain its focus on learning through three decades of general finger pointing in and outside the academy, learning communities deserve to be counted because they have attempted to do what counts.

Questions about how and whether learning communities enhance learning are also rich and plentiful enough to motivate a count. Louis Rocconi’s (2011) exploration into the experiences of 241 first-year students at one urban research university exemplifies why a count is important. Rocconi’s research reveals that positive gains as self-reported by students are not directly related to learning community participation. He concludes that programs matter because they facilitate student engagement (which Rocconi found directly related to positive gains). He suggests that learning communities and other initiatives may be interchangeable and that “any type of intervention that increases student engagement, fosters student-faculty interactions, and collaboration on coursework would be beneficial to implement” (p. 190). What is missing from this study’s list of limitations (and the limitations of nearly all such studies) is a caution against generalizing the findings to other types of learning communities. Rocconi describes the program under study, in this way:

[D]uring registration students had the option of joining one of the learning community sections. Classes were linked together by a common theme such as where science meets art; speaking, writing, and film; and human and computer interaction. Each learning community section was limited to 25 students although not all sections were filled to capacity. (p. 182)

Limitations listed in the study regard the type of institution, the small sample size, the limited number of engagement measures, the self-reported data, and the self-selection bias among learning community volunteers. Had a robust typology been available, Rocconi may have been able to identify the nature and strength of the thematic link, the role of the faculty, the nature of the assignments and learning assessment procedures and other critically important implementation variables. As noted, most studies in this field suffer this same limitation on limitations. I launched my scholarly journey naively believing that findings from my dissertation *Residential Learning Communities and the Freshman Year* (Henscheid, 1996) applied to residential learning communities writ large (other limitations noted of course). The empirical typology that emerged from the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (Inkelas & Associates, 2007) was still a few years away and might have helped to convince me that Socrates was right: “The more I learn, the more I learn how little I know.”

Clearer definitions would improve how effectively researchers communicate about learning communities. Susan Talburt and Deron Boyles (2005) “question some fundamental tenets underlying the idea and practice of learning communities” and suggest that “[t]here appears to be little space in the overall discourse for questions about learning communities themselves” (p. 210). The authors dissect historical antecedents of the modern learning community movement, turn a critical eye to its norms and discourses, and recount their uneven personal experiences with a learning community. Jaffee (2007) describes the ill effects on the learning environment of student hyper-bonding in a first-year learning community cohort. And Gilbert (2004) notes that participants in a more structured and academically oriented living-learning community program derived different outcomes than students involved in a less structured program not organized around an academic theme. Gilbert’s analysis also revealed that several subgroups within his sample—including students of color, junior-year and first-year students in an unstructured living-learning community program—derived different outcomes than their counterparts in a traditional residence hall setting.

As discussed in greater detail below, this movement’s leaders, past and present, have welcomed open inquiry. Their attitude and an ongoing scholarly and practical interest in learning communities combine to offer a third reason to launch a national count. These programs are now a maturing academic enterprise with ebbs and flows and shifts in character and characters. A national count becomes at once a learning community magna carta, a census, and a launch pad for adaptation and innovation. National Learning Communities Project fellow William Moore’s 2005 predictions for the future of learning communities revealed the level of haziness existing at that time. The movement may be, strengthening and deepening in pockets while fragmenting overall, weighed down perhaps by its popularity. There seem to be some

institutions doing and studying some form of learning communities very seriously, but most institutions don't have the time, resources, or inclination to do that. Maybe such a process is natural, the inevitable consequence of any reform movement within the far-flung and wildly disparate landscape of higher education. (as cited in MacGregor & Smith, 2005, p. 4)

If the edges of this innovation were fuzzy in 2005, they are set to become even more so.

A Growing Need to Count

This fuzziness is the fourth, and final, reason to launch a count. The Washington Center is in the process of advocating for new era learning communities that blend curricular interventions with wider student success initiatives. As described on the Center's website, learning communities are moving away from,

models to learning communities as an intervention strategy for student success where attention is paid to subsets of students whose completion rates lag behind their peers. The Center also advocates multiplying what a learning community means away from one or two types of learning communities to multiple interventions with a common purpose informed by explicit learning community program mission and goals, articulated in relation to an institution's strategic plan. New era learning communities move forward the best of our collective efforts. The throughline—the constant—is the commitment to quality education for all students, and an explicit institutional acknowledgement that curriculum planning time for faculty and other teaching team members is foundational to learning communities done well. (Washington Center, n.d.-a)

As the Center promulgates an inclusive definition of learning communities, it does so with the idea that the resulting complexities will also support transformations in campus culture focused on enhanced student learning. In this increasingly inclusive environment, a national count of learning communities would allow time-tested and new best practices to be better understood and replicated and, conversely, would help campuses avoid costly mistakes. By extension, the quality of learning outcomes assessment, program evaluation, and research across institutions would also improve.

A Non-Standardized Definition

Counting will not be easy given how definitions vary. The Washington Center, a recognized pioneer of and clearinghouse for information on U.S.

learning communities, now casts a wide net, noting that “[e]ducators who design learning communities are inventive; there is no orthodoxy about which curricular designs work best so long as the learning community design works for the students it is intended to serve on a particular campus” (Washington Center, n.d.-b). The Washington Center definition includes linked or paired courses (cohorts of students enrolled in two or more courses); first-year programs (student cohorts enrolled in a first-year seminar and at least one other course); coordinated studies (two or more team-taught courses enrolling a cohort of students); and living-learning communities (student cohorts that live together in residence halls and enroll in at least one course together). The Center submits that learning communities also minimally include:

- A strategically-defined cohort of students taking courses together which have been identified through a review of institutional data
- Robust, collaborative partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs
- Explicitly designed opportunities to practice integrative and interdisciplinary learning.

Finally, the Center emphasizes that the purpose of a learning community program should be informed by and tied to broader institutional goals (Washington Center, n.d.-c).

This typology and list of minimal components are not currently employed at the Washington Center or elsewhere to inventory the number and types of collegiate learning communities housed on American campuses. The counts that have been used come from multiple sources and are divided into two broad definitional camps: those who limit a learning community to a cohort of students enrolled in two or more courses and those who define these programs as including cohorts of students sharing two or more educationally purposeful experiences (i.e., cohorts enrolling in a single course and living together in a residence hall or, as with Portland State University’s University Studies Program, individual students enrolled in a sequence of courses over multiple years). For this discussion I refer to the former as Camp A (adherents to the narrower standard) and the latter as Camp B (adherents to the broader definition). Each camp may also have internal variations related to the minimum components identified above (i.e. data-informed cohort selection; cross divisional collaborations; interdisciplinary and integrative learning opportunities; and links to institutional goals). The difficulty in counting the number of learning communities begins to emerge. Below, numbers offered by several sources are summarized in Table 1.

How Many Learning Communities Are There?

In 2001, Barbara Leigh Smith, then the co-director of the Washington Center, noted in *Peer Review* that curricular learning communities [Camp A] were present at more than 800 two- and four-year colleges and universities. Smith and her co-director Jean MacGregor repeated this number (800) in their 2009 article, “Learning Communities and the Quest for Quality.” In between these two accountings, Smith (2003) reported that more than five hundred colleges and universities now offer some type of [Camp A] ‘learning community’ in which students take two or more courses as a group” (p. 14). In their 2004 article in *College Teaching*, Lucy Dodge and Martha E. Kendall attribute this same number (500) to counting done by the American Association of Higher Education. Dodge and Kendall offer an idealized characterization of a [Camp A] learning community as a program that “weaves together the learning, skills, and assignments of two or more classes into a unified mosaic of educational objectives by blending the instruction of logically related disciplines” (p. 150). Five hundred [Camp A] learning communities was also the number reported by MacGregor and Smith in their 2005 *About Campus* article “Where are Learning Communities Now? National Leaders Take Stock.”

Another source for a count is the national directory of learning communities administered by the Washington Center. In 2002, the Washington Center, under the auspices of the Pew Charitable Trust’s funded National Learning Communities Project, launched a website that included this national directory. In 2003, the first iteration of the directory listed descriptions of learning communities from 127 colleges and universities. On August 31, 2005, that number was up to 245, and by June 1, 2015, the Washington Center indicated that the directory listed programs at more than 300 colleges and universities and included some Camp B learning communities. Institutions that list their learning communities in the directory are unlikely to be representative of all colleges and universities. As a collaborator on development of the website and the directory, I know it is a showcase or “who’s who” of learning communities.

A better (albeit older) source of data may be the “Second National Survey of First-Year Academic Practices” from the Policy Center on the First Year of College (Barefoot, 2002). The survey indicated that 62 percent of the 966 responding research universities, baccalaureate colleges, and community colleges offered a [Camp A] learning community program at that time. Extrapolated to all U.S. institutions, that would translate to about 600 colleges and universities offering one or more [Camp A] learning communities. In the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education 2010 survey, 56 percent of responding institutions (n=295) indicated that they offered [Camp A] learning

communities (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). From 2006 through 2014, the National Survey of Student Engagement has put the percentage of institutions with learning communities between 15 and 18. In its 2014 report, “Bringing the Institution into Focus-2014,” the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicated that students at 15 percent (n=93) of the 622 responding institutions reported participating in [Camp A] learning communities. NSSE institutions are reported to be a representative sample of institutional types, so, if we extrapolate those findings to the 3,122 four-year degree granting institutions listed by National Center for Educational Statistics (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2014), as many as 470 four-year degree-granting institutions may offer [Camp A] learning communities. I hesitate to extend this logic, however. NSSE participating institutions, while representative of Carnegie classification types, may be more likely than non-responding institutions to provide engaging opportunities, including learning communities, to their students. The same could be said for results from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) (2012). Students at 160 of the 336 institutions represented in the survey indicated that they had participated in learning communities. If we use the National Center for Educational Statistics (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2014) count of 2,230 two-year institutions to extrapolate, the result would be more than 1,000 two-year colleges potentially offering learning communities. Of course a caveat is in order because this is student self-report data.

The source editors of a forthcoming book (Chism Schmidt & Graziano) illustrate just how far one can go to count learning communities. In research for their volume on first-year seminars and learning communities, Chism Schmidt & Graziano turned to a Google search on “learning communities.” Of the 1.6 million hits, many were from elementary and secondary education, higher education, corporations, non-profit organizations, and elsewhere. They too attribute the difficulty in determining an accurate number to the non-standardized use of the term. My own quick perusal of another online “authority,” Wikipedia, puts the number of learning communities at more than 250 based on entries in the National Learning Communities directory (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_community, page last updated October, 2014). Wikipedia does not specify whether these are Camp A or Camp B programs.

Table 1
Sources and Numbers of Learning Communities in U.S. Colleges and Universities

Cohorts of students enrolled together in two or more courses (Camp A)		Cohorts of students engaged together in two or more educationally purposeful activities (Camp B)	
Source	Number	Source	Number
Smith (2001)	>800	National Learning Communities Directory (2003)	127
Barefoot (2002)	≈600	National Learning Communities Directory (2005)	245
Smith (2003)	>500	National Learning Communities Directory (2015)	>300
Dodge & Kendall (2004)	500	Washington Center for the Improvement of the Quality of Undergraduate Education (2015)	“hundreds of two- and four-year institutions throughout the United States.”
Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick (2004)	hundreds of institutions	Chism Schmidt & Graziano (in press)	1.6 million hits on learning communities in Google
MacGregor & Smith (2005)	500	Wikipedia (2014)	>250
Smith & MacGregor (2009)	>800	National Directory of Residential Learning Communities (2015)	216 (residential only)
Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch (2012)	295		
National Survey of Student Engagement (2012); Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann (2014)	≈470 4-year institutions		
Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012); Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann (2014)	>1,000 2-year institutions		

Note. Counts may include single learning communities at single institutions, multiple learning communities at single institutions or multiple sections of single learning communities. Survey and directory participants may not be nationally representative. Extrapolations from these sources are for illustration purposes only and should be used with caution.

Definitional Divisions

Institutional examples of learning communities in Chism Schmidt and Graziano's book exclude Camp B programs, those that do not have a cohort of students enrolled in at least two credit-bearing courses. They cite the standard used in the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 2007 report, "College Learning for the New Global Century." Camp A is also the standard MDRC used in designing its Learning Communities Demonstration Project (Visher, Weiss, Weissman, Rudd, & Wathington, 2012) to explore academic outcomes among community college student participants in developmental education learning communities. Restricting learning communities to the Camp A definition is a departure from the Washington Center's broader use of the term and from the one the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) has used since 1994 in its national survey of first-year seminars (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). For this survey, the NRC defines a learning community with a first-year seminar as the linkage of a cohort of students enrolled in the seminar to one or more courses *or* to a common set of theme-based experiences (emphasis added). The National Resource Center indicates that it selected this definition after a review of several extant typologies (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Inkelas & Longerbeam, 2008; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Love & Tokuno, 1999; MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 1997; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith, et al., 2004; Snider & Venable, 2000; Stassen, 2003).

A sizeable subset of Camp B learning-living programs does not necessarily include a credit-bearing academic component. The definition of these programs forwarded by the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) is broad indeed. According to the ACUHO-I (2015), a residential learning community is:

a residential education unit in a college or university that is organized on the basis of an academic theme or approach and is intended to integrate academic learning and community living. The unit may or may not be degree granting and may involve collaboration with formal academic departments outside the unit. Programs...provide formal and/or informal educational opportunities such as courses, seminars, tutorials, or presentations. These programs may or may not provide academic credit to participants.

The effort to understand the landscape of residential learning communities was substantially improved with the 2004 and 2007 administrations of the National Study of Living-Learning Programs. In their report on the results, Inkelas and Soldner (2011) described the most comprehensive review available of learning community typologies, including living-learning community typologies. Inkelas

and Soldner did not extend their research to counting the number of living-learning programs that exist in total or under each type. For that, one may start with ACUHO-I's directory of residential learning communities (2015b), which lists 216 such programs at 125 separate colleges and universities. Several institutions each list multiple residential learning communities (Ohio State University alone describes 32 separate programs), suggesting that if an accurate count of learning communities were completed, the number of Camp B programs (including residential learning community programs that do not include two or more student cohort-enrolled courses) would be substantially larger than the numbers for Camp A. Sequenced multi-year general education courses such as Portland State's University Studies and the University of Idaho's General Education program have, over the years, moved in and out of Camp B. The shift and flux of programs strongly suggest that it would be a monumental task to determine whether the delivery mechanism for general education constitutes a learning community in every two- and four-year degree-granting institution.

Without a consensus, the Washington Center (n.d.-b) has characterized the number of learning community programs broadly, to say the least: "In one form or another, learning communities operate at hundreds of two- and four-year institutions throughout the United States." This equivocal language mirrors that used in *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education*, the 2004 follow-up to the seminal 1990 volume written by Barbara Leigh Smith, Jean MacGregor, Roberta S. Matthews, and Faith Gabelnick.

The Down and Upsides of Counting

What May be Lost?

A national census of the types and numbers of learning communities at American colleges and universities may bring order and clarity to the practice, but at what cost? Could codifying a movement characterized by grassroots activism and local intentionality threaten this innovation's chief attractions—its adaptability and flexibility? "[F]rom loosely connected course clusters to team-taught programs of integrated, interdisciplinary study" (MacGregor & Smith, 2005, p. 3), learning communities have been, and are meant to be, adapted to a variety of campus contexts, student populations, budgets, faculty and staff interest and capacity levels, and institutional goals. Without orthodoxy in interpretation or implementation and with generally positive reported effects on students, faculty, staff, and institutions, the national popularity of these programs has grown in part because there is no national dictate (MacGregor & Smith, 2005). While some learning community leaders have worried that one byproduct of this flexibility is wide variation in program quality, others, including national learning community leader Marie Eaton, have argued that, as the movement expands, "There is a danger of reification. . . . The movement must stay flexible and responsive to new

ideas about what learning communities might be while holding on to the key elements that have proven to have power” (as cited in MacGregor and Smith, 2005, p. 4). Because practices vary, institutions tend to look inward at their own programs when they assess outcomes (Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, & Lindblad, 2003). Results from multi-institutional research (beginning with investigations conducted in the mid-1990s, e.g., Tinto, Goodsell Love, & Russo, 1994; Tinto, & Russo, 1994) have bolstered arguments to develop learning communities. However, most of the energy for understanding why and how they work has been expended on individual campuses. The codification of learning communities that would precede a national count may threaten their distinction as an initiative embedded in and responsive to local context.

The concern that reification limits the utility of an educational innovation has been raised elsewhere and echoes the hesitancy of some learning community advocates to codify their practice. One corollary is the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubric project of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). Since 2007, rubrics in the project have been widely adopted and in some cases significantly adapted by individual faculty members and programs. Homegrown rubric design has been encouraged as a context-sensitive way to meet the needs of students, faculty, and academic programs on single campuses. Now, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, use of standard versions of the rubrics by several institutions is increasing. AAC&U has partnered with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SSEEO) Association to demonstrate that the same rubric designs can be employed across institutions and states to reliably assess student academic work (AAC&U/State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2015). According to one AAC&U senior fellow for quality, curriculum and assessment, there is still a need to clarify how single use adaptations and use of standard rubrics across states will co-exist (Gary Brown, personal communication, June 5, 2015).

Similarly, the locally responsive and adaptable nature of student electronic portfolios has resulted in definitional differences and complicated counting (Steve Ehrmann, personal communication, June 2, 2015). Although locally designed rubrics and electronic portfolios lack the reliability and validity of standardized testing, these applications were designed with the central purpose of improving local practice. As AAC&U Vice President Terrell Rhodes noted about rubrics in 2011, their primary usefulness,

lies in their ability to communicate faculty expectations . . . and to engage with students in gauging their progress during a single program or along an entire educational pathway . . . [T]he adoption of the rubrics and their adaptations to specific campus missions and outcomes attests to their usability and meaningfulness. (p. 10)

In the same article, Rhodes extends this logic to electronic portfolios. Where techniques and technologies become useful, there is always the possibility of standardization and, worse yet, institutional rankings.

What May be Gained?

On the other hand, defining terms for learning communities, as a precursor to a national count, could improve the process of investigating how and why they work, on single campuses and beyond. The Washington Center has strongly endorsed disciplined inquiry and intentional program development; Article 1 of the journal's first issue, "Making Knowledge to Strengthen our Field," (Washington Center Editorial Team, 2013) draws on the history of composition to illustrate how a rapidly growing academic field can move from chaotic research and poorly informed practice to disciplined inquiry and research-based program development. According to Lardner and Malnarich (2012), the problem with inconsistent use of the phrase learning community was illustrated by the MDRC's report on the 2012 Learning Communities Demonstration Project. In their rebuttal to this research (which found, in part, only modest positive impacts of student participation in a learning community), Lardner and Malnarich take exception to the researchers' use of unclear definitions:

The Learning Community Demonstration Project could make a significant contribution to the field if it helped practitioners understand a more nuanced account of the impact of this intervention: first, that learning communities have multiple components which if implemented fully have a significant impact on course completion and graduation; and second, that the impact of learning communities varies widely based on the degree to which these components are actually implemented. In short, all learning communities are not the same... (p. 3)

In research, as in assessment and evaluation, the investigator defines her terms in order to delimit the scope of the inquiry (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). This sets boundaries around "precisely what the researcher intends to do [and] what the researcher does *not* intend to do" (p. 43). The three parts of a formal definition include "a) the *term* itself; b) the *genera*, the general class to which the concept being defined belongs; and c) the *differentia*, the specific characteristics or traits that distinguish the concept from all other members of the general classification" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013, p. 44). Identifying and better understanding the fine-grained details of learning communities is the next frontier for researchers and practitioners. As noted by the Washington Center (n.d.-c),

There is clearly room for much more research and analysis. For instance, which cross-campus collaborative components need to be in place to support effective (and sustainable) learning community

programs? What particular learning community practices are especially effective at fostering transformative learning, sustained student engagement, and persistence to graduation—as evidenced by both quantitative and qualitative data? And, what kind of professional learning program supports educational excellence and capacity-building?

Lardner and Malnarich (2008) acknowledge that, similar to other educational initiatives, learning communities are a “complex and variable phenomena” (p. 37). After three-plus decades of research generally confirming that learning communities have an overall positive effect on participating student learning experiences, persistence, and academic achievement, the Washington Center co-directors say they are “mindful that research on *effective* (emphasis added) learning communities is not conclusive” (2008, p. 37).

The National First-Year Seminar Story

There may be lessons to learn from nearly three decades of counting first-year seminars. In May 1970, University of South Carolina President Thomas Jones launched his search for a mechanism to bond students more closely to the institution. Forty-five years later his brainchild, University 101 (then called freshman seminar), is an international phenomenon. Early on, USC’s first University 101 director, John N. Gardner, recognized that a credible academic endeavor required a scholarly base. For that, he enlisted researcher Paul Fidler to train a critical eye on the USC program and establish norms for research conducted on other campuses. By 1988, the National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience had published its first monograph (Whiteley, 1988) and launched a practitioner’s newsletter highlighting practices in freshman seminars and its offspring, the freshman year experience. The next year, Jossey-Bass released M. Lee Upcraft, Gardner, and Associates’ *The Freshman Year Experience* and the peer-reviewed *Journal of The Freshman Year* was born. The National Resource Center conducted and published results of its first national survey (Fidler & Fidler, 1991), a landmark study that became essential to establishing a field of scholars and practitioners. The aim of this initial survey was to begin the long, slow process of defining what was meant by the term “freshman seminar.”

The National Survey of First-Year Seminars reached its 25th year with the ninth administration of the survey in 2012-2013. Each year’s data set has documented the evolving nature and extent of first-year seminars on American campuses. The survey has drawn from a broad sample of colleges and universities and addressed topics including seminar characteristics and administration; student demographics; instructional roles, development, and compensation; and assessment practices and outcomes. According to the now-renamed National

Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, responses to this survey comprise the most comprehensive data set of institutional information on first-year seminars and provide a national portrait of current and emerging practices and structures (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

The national learning community movement has an equally robust intellectual leader in the Washington Center. Its staff, regional networks, conferences, publications, institutes, and online resources have secured learning communities as “part of the vocabulary of higher education” (Vincent Tinto, quoted in MacGregor & Smith, p. 2). Because of the work of the National Learning Communities Project and of the Center,

[t]here is a much broader base of understanding and support within institutions [for learning communities] than there was even a few short years ago. It is no longer an outlier concept, on the fringe; it’s a regular topic, having reached a level of recognition similar to other key movements such as service learning, classroom research, and cooperative learning. (Marie Hesse, quoted in MacGregor & Smith, p. 2).

In 2010, the Washington Center added a new tool for learning community researchers, educators, and administrators with publication of results from the first academic year Online Survey of Students’ Experiences of Learning in LCs.¹ Every year since, this survey has involved 62 two- and four-year institutions and, over time, more than 20,000 students have reported their learning experiences as survey respondents. A national effort to collect data from institutional representatives about learning communities would substantially add to our understanding of the conditions set to facilitate this learning.

Conclusion

In the preceding discussion, I have attempted to build a case for counting learning communities at America’s colleges and universities while acknowledging difficulties inherent in such an effort. Learning communities should be counted because their advocates deserve to know how pervasive and effective this initiative is at achieving its central aim—enhancing student learning. A count is necessary to bring empirical order to studies that would purport to make claims about learning communities in the absence of clear definitions. It is now time to count because every new generation of educators would have much to gain from having a clear sense of the who, what, where, when, and how of learning communities. And, finally, it is time to count because new era learning communities will likely be even harder to define than ones from the previous era.

¹ Information about the survey is available at <http://www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/survey/index.html>

As a group, learning community advocates tend to embrace ambiguity. They, like William James (1907), operate from the belief that the “world of concrete personal experience . . . is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed” (p. 21). The lack of clarity about learning communities does not make a positive contribution to the beautiful and necessary messiness of learning or life.

Myriad resources are available to apply in an effort to count learning communities. The Washington Center’s impressive network of supporters, collaborators, scholars, and practitioners can readily be tapped to begin this work. The National Learning Communities Conference and Washington Center-sponsored learning community coordinator meetings gather hundreds of individuals from two- and four-year institutions, any and all of whom could join the conversation. Former fellows from the National Learning Community Project, past and present faculty from the Washington Center’s annual learning community institute, and members of the Washington Center’s many regional networks could be canvassed for ideas and assigned tasks. The typologies identified by (and emerging from) the National Study of Living-Learning Programs await use as a starting point. Ideas may also be collected from individuals at institutions listed in the National Learning Communities Directory and the ACUHO-I directory. Administrators of other national surveys on practices in undergraduate education would, I imagine, be delighted to help frame the budgetary, administrative, logistical, and conceptual discussion. A short, and far from exhaustive, list might include the John N. Gardner Institute, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, NSSE, CCSE, the Higher Education Research Institute, and AAC&U. The first two centers could be particularly helpful in describing both losses and gains accrued from years of codifying and counting first-year seminars.

Master’s and doctoral students with interest in learning communities could focus on collecting, analyzing, and reporting data from a national learning community survey. Graduate degree programs from one or several institutions could be approached as partners. Seed money for the National Study of Living-Learning Programs was awarded from the National Science Foundation, ACUHO-I, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. Similar agencies and entities may consider underwriting the launch of a learning community count. Another potential continuing source of funding for a survey could be sales of annual report monographs and customized campus reports, a project that the Washington Center might support given its long experience in publishing.

Beyond the question of funding sources, a national count of learning communities could, by definition, enlist participants from all quarters. With diverse perspectives shaped by their different disciplines, divisions, and

institutions, these participants would be able to contribute to the monumental task, everything from taxonomy to analysis and dissemination of the results. What started as a bit of fun with my friend Drew has taken shape as a serious challenge to catalog and report on our collective work and to support our efforts at improving student learning—because if we can map our terrain, from local to national, we can also command our future.

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