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## Developing a Comprehensive Learning Community Program: Providing a Historical Perspective

Jamie L. Workman

*University of Northern Iowa*, [jamie.workman@uni.edu](mailto:jamie.workman@uni.edu)

Lyn Redington

*University of Northern Iowa*, [lyn.redington@uni.edu](mailto:lyn.redington@uni.edu)

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# Developing a Comprehensive Learning Community Program: Providing a Historical Perspective

## **Abstract**

This is the first of a three-part series which will share information about how a mid-size, comprehensive university developed a learning community program, including a residential curriculum. Through intentional collaboration and partnerships, the team, comprised of faculty and staff throughout the university, developed a “multi-year plan for learning communities to help create and support an intentional, integrative and transformational experience that is student-centered, faculty-led, and administratively supported” (UNI, 2014).

## **Keywords**

learning communities, residential curriculum, living learning communities

## Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined for use in this research:

*University of Northern Iowa (UNI)*: a comprehensive university located in Cedar Falls, Iowa. UNI enrolls nearly 12,000 students and offers more than 90 academic majors.

*Success UNI*: a first year experience initiative piloted and offered by the Department of Residence between 1998–2007. It offered students the opportunity to live together by classification and to take a non-credit course taught by faculty.

*Learning Communities (LC)*: student-centered, faculty-driven, administratively-supported educational experiences that help students succeed in their intellectual and personal development while promoting community engagement.

*Living Learning Communities (LLC)*: students live together based on academic majors or academic classification.

*UNI Now*: a 3-day extended orientation offered prior to classes beginning in the fall semester for new-to-UNI students.

*LC Curriculum*: a curriculum based on Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory, with developmental learning objectives based on students' year in school.

*Learning Community Advisory Council (LCAC)*: chaired by a faculty member in academic affairs and an administrator in student affairs. The purpose of this council is to plan and implement the University-wide LC curriculum and program.

*Living Learning Community Programming Council (LLC PC)*: chaired by the Graduate Assistant for LLCs, a member of the Department of Residence staff. The purpose of this group is to share ideas and give updates on LLC programming, curriculum implementation, and other LLC-related happenings.

## Background

In the mid-1990s, a small group of faculty and staff explored the feasibility of developing a first year experience program at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI). A pilot program was developed with 60 students enrolled in four sections of Success UNI, an optional, not-for-credit nine-week course. In the fall of 1997, a grant was submitted to obtain funds from the Qualities of an

Educated Person (QEP) project (an internal funding stream for new initiatives). The QEP grant was approved in January 1998 with the goal to further develop and institutionalize Success UNI. In the fall of 1999, the program expanded from 4 sections to 20, with an enrollment of 300 students. Fifteen sections were offered for first year students; 4 sections were available for transfer students; and 1 section enrolled non-traditional students.

The goals of Success UNI were to improve participants' academic skills; understanding of their purpose for attending UNI; understanding the importance of critical thinking; sense of belonging; ability to access resources; and confidence, as consumers of and contributors to university life. Additional goals included enriching the understanding of UNI's newest students by faculty and staff.

In addition to the optional Success UNI course, residential students living in first year only communities were invited to return to campus for an optional-but-encouraged two day orientation program called Dive In Days. This extended orientation program was designed to facilitate student success by inculcating them with tips and tools to promote their academic and interpersonal success. The Vice President of Student Affairs provided a welcome to them. This was followed by meetings with their academic advisors, tours of campus, and opportunities to get to know their fellow students.

With a first- to second-year retention rate of 90% (the university's retention rate was 81%), the program was deemed a success. However, in 2008, changing leadership and shifting goals of the university necessitated ending the program. The university administration had set goals to develop a stronger partnership between academic and student affairs. As such, it was determined previously existing programs, unless central to the university mission, be paused until a more formal relationship could be formed.

In August 2015, the university reinstated a new and improved extended orientation. UNI Now! is under the leadership of the Director of Student Success and Retention, reporting to the Vice President of Student Affairs. UNI Now! has developed a team approach to this initiative. Faculty, staff and students were instrumental in determining the content and the schedule. Following this first year, outcomes are being assessed and planning for fall 2016, including budgetary needs is occurring.

### **Partners**

To ensure a successful learning community initiative, strong partnerships and active collaborations must occur. This is true at the University of Northern Iowa. The development of learning communities (LCs) has received support at the top levels, including the provost and associate provost of academic affairs. Academic programs that have been actively engaged with developing a strong

foundation include the biology, business, education, and music programs. Other departments instrumental in supporting learning communities are the department of residence, academic advising services, new student programs and institutional research.

Capitalizing on the strong partnerships that have developed over the years, a team of select faculty, staff and administrators, representing academic affairs, student affairs and institutional research were invited to participate in the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities (NSILC) in the summer of 2014. NSILC, hosted by The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, is designed to help two-year and four-year campuses that are starting or expanding learning community programs. UNI had several LLCs in place, plans to create more in upcoming years, as well as multiple programs that were in essence LCs, but not labeled as such. A priority of the NSILC team was to create a plan to expand and formalize the LC program, and take a comprehensive plan back to campus for approval and implementation.

### **LC Program Purpose and Goals**

The NSILC team wanted to begin their work by determining clear goals for the LC program. After discussing both group members' and institutional priorities, the primary goal established by the team was "to create a multi-year plan for learning communities to help create and support an intentional, integrative and transformational UNI experience that is student-centered, faculty-led, and administratively supported" (UNI, 2014).

Based on the concept of "thriving" in Schreiner, Louis and Nelson's (2012) publication *Thriving in transitions: A research-based approach to college student success*, the LC program contributes to the institutional mission by creating learning experiences where students "thrive" in their college transitions while synthesizing and connecting these experiences (UNI, 2014). Consistent with the institutional mission and strategic plan, these experiences have the overall goals of helping students thrive while embracing challenge, engaging in critical inquiry and creative thought, and becoming engaged citizens and scholars (2014).

LCs at UNI are recognized as "high impact practices" as identified by Kuh and Schneider's (2008) *High Impact Educational Practices*. LCs enhance student learning, can provide structure for UNI's mission of creating transformational learning experiences, and allow faculty and staff to collaborate with students in integrating learning across a wide variety of topics, both in and outside the classroom (UNI 2014). Based on the recommendations of Kinzie (2014), UNI LCs incorporate problem-centered learning around real-world issues; include collaborative assignments and projects; are writing intensive, with a focus on reflection and self-evaluation; provide substantial interaction with faculty, staff,

and peers; and create opportunities for meaningful engagement with campus and/or community partners (UNI, 2014).

### **Adoption of Theory**

The NSILC team believed a key to ensuring the curriculum would meet its intended student developmental outcomes would be to ground it in student development theory. A priority was to have different learning objectives for each year in school, with the later objectives building upon the earlier ones. From this priority, it was determined that Schlossberg's transition theory could serve as the foundation for the curriculum (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2006). This theory focuses on three developmental stages, *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out* (p. 32). The team adapted the language from the *moving out* stage and labeled it as "moving on".

The *moving in* stage of our LC program is targeted at first year students, and focuses on the institutional priority to "work on personal development by embracing challenge and learning" (UNI, 2014, p. 1). The intermediate *moving through* stage is targeted at sophomore students, and focuses on the institutional priority of "developing leadership skills by being engaged in critical inquiry and creative thought" (UNI, 2014, p.1). The third and final *moving on* stage is targeted at upper-class students and focuses on the institutional priority of "becoming an engaged citizen and scholar" (UNI, 2014, p.1). Each tier contains learning objectives built around the three curricular goals of academic and intellectual development, community and cultural engagement, and personal development. By incorporating Schlossberg's theory with institutional priorities, we hoped that students would meet a wide variety of learning objectives over the course of their education.

### **Action Plan**

As part of our work at NSILC, the team created a two-year action plan for LC implementation. Key steps were identified and a deadline assigned to each of those steps. A first priority was restructuring the existing Learning Community Advisory Council (LCAC) which included members of the NSILC team, and other stakeholders. The LCAC chairs determined that breaking up the existing council into two smaller groups, a revised LCAC and a Living Learning Community (LLC) programming council, would best ensure that progress could be made on the action plan.

From there, each group worked on specific action plan items that applied to their purpose. Tasks included projects as simple as sharing the work of the NSILC team with the President, Provost, and other key campus leaders in early

fall 2014, to projects as complex as determining what UNI defines as a successful student in spring, 2015.

Now a year into our curriculum, the LCAC has begun to examine which goals were met, and which were not. The LCAC realized the action plan was a part of the NSILC requirements and was somewhat aspirational in nature. To date, not all goals for the first year have been achieved. As the council reflects on this, they realize that it is important to be realistic about the time and commitment it takes, both on an individual and institutional level, to truly administer a campus-wide LC program. The next step for the council is to complete the remaining tasks for year one, refine our plan, and move forward.

### **Lessons Learned**

As co-chairs of the LCAC, we have learned some valuable lessons in implementing a campus-wide LC program, and feel these lessons can be valuable to other campuses embarking on similar experiences. First, institutional buy-in is a necessary and early step. As our campus history has taught us, changes in leadership can sometimes cause a pause or a halt in initiatives. With more recent leadership changes on our campus, we have been proactive in making sure key leaders are supportive of our program and will provide us the institutional backing we need to make the program a success. Even if a campus is not experiencing upper-level administrative shifts, changes at the operational level can cause delay. We believe the stronger the institutional buy-in, the easier it is to sustain a program through transition at any level.

This support has been made easier by the intentionality that was used in creating the LC curriculum. By linking the curriculum to student development theory, our university strategic plan, and the academic master plan, the LCAC has been able to justify why moving to the LC model campus wide makes sense. This has helped us identify practices on campus that meet UNI's definition of a LC, but haven't been labeled as such (Orientation, First Year Experience, and our Liberal Arts Core curriculum, for example), and bring them to the table for LC planning and implementation.

This has also helped us determine exactly who should be at the LCAC table. By purposefully examining practices on campus that are in essence learning communities, we were able to identify key stakeholders who can help move us forward. For example, a new LLC for the current academic year is Women and Gender studies, which includes a gender-neutral housing component. As the LLC came to fruition, it was determined that the director of the Women and Gender Studies academic program should be a part of the council. Similarly, as we continued our focus on academic development and connecting the LC curriculum to our Liberal Arts Core, a university librarian was asked to join as well. These

key players are not only supportive and enthusiastic about our LC program, but also are in positions to help move us forward.

We recommend that campuses approach their advisory councils, committees, or other planning groups with the same level of intentionality. Not having enough, having too many, or not having the right people in these groups can hinder progress and ultimately success. Strategically determining which stakeholders were needed in our LCAC helped streamline our progress and has helped us move forward.

We know that our work with our curriculum is nowhere near completion, nor will it be after our two-year action plan is complete. This will be an on-going process at UNI, as it will on other campuses working with LCs. It is our hope that by sharing some of our story we can assist campuses who share our commitment to LC programs and that together, we can create a positive and seamless learning experience for students.

### **Future Writings**

As we continue to refine and implement the LC program at UNI, it is the hope of the authors to share further lessons from practice through future articles in this series. Our second piece will focus on the curriculum in-depth, and how it is being used in both LC and LLC programs. Our third and final piece will provide an overview of assessment strategies and share data that could be useful to other campuses creating or expanding on their LC and/or LLC initiatives. It is our hope that this first article provided an overview of our growing program and sparked interest in further learning and applying strategies and lessons to other programs.

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