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Developing a comprehensive learning community program: Implementing a learning community curriculum

Jamie L. Workman

University of Northern Iowa, jworkman@valdosta.edu

Lyn Redington

University of Iowa, lyn-redington@uiowa.edu

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Abstract

This is the second 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, living learning communities, curriculum development

Background

As noted in our previous article, (Workman & Redington, 2015) the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) began working with Learning Communities (LCs) in the mid-1990s. The program, known as Success UNI, officially ended in 2008 because of changes in university leadership and institutional priorities. While the university's Department of Residence (DOR) continued offering living options focused on academic classification (i.e., first year, second year), there was not strong university-wide support until the 2013-2014 academic year. With new university leadership in place and a shift back to an academic focus for the university's residential philosophy, a team of faculty and administrators formed the Living Community Advisory Council (LCAC). This team, with the support of the university's provost, led the expansion of LLCs within the DOR and the rebirth of LCs campus-wide. A subset of the LCAC attended the 2014 National Summer Institute on Learning Communities (NSILC), where the hard work of this team resulted in the creation of an LC curriculum.

Theoretical Overview

A priority for the NSILC team was to base their curriculum in student development theory. This allowed the team to determine learning outcomes for a student's year in school while also incorporating institutional priorities. The team determined Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Goodman, Anderson, & Schlossberg, 2006) most appropriate to serve as the theoretical framework. Schlossberg's theory consists of three developmental stages, *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out* (p. 32). As the team considered the desired goals of their curriculum, it was evident that these stages applied.

In Schlossberg's *moving in* stage, individuals approach and begin the process of transition (2006). Coping resources, known as the 4 S's in Schlossberg's theory of *Situation, Self, Support* and *Strategies*, "provide a way to identify potential resources someone has to cope with the transition" (p. 32). Targeted at first-year students, learning outcomes in this stage focus on the institutional priority of personal development through embracing challenge and learning.

Schlossberg's second stage, *moving through*, begins "once learners know the ropes" (p. 49). This stage is ideal for second and third year students as they continue through the transition while reevaluating their coping resources. Students in this stage are expected to develop leadership skills by being engaged in critical inquiry and creative thought.

Finally, Schlossberg's third and final stage, *moving out* not only extends the previous stage, *moving on*, but also represents the fruition of the LC curriculum.

Individuals in this final stage are ending one transition or experience and preparing for the process of another. Institutional goals for students in this advanced stage are to become engaged scholars and citizens.

In addition to Schlossberg's framework and UNI's developmental goals for students, it was important that the LC curriculum connect to the institution's co-curricular goals as well. While many areas were considered, the NSILC team determined *Academic and Personal Development*, *Community and Cultural Engagement*, and *Personal Development* to be most appropriate for the curriculum. Each area is narrow enough to give it the focus the team wanted while broad enough to give those implementing the curriculum autonomy in how each goal could be achieved. Within each goal and tier, specific learning outcomes were created to measure development in that area. A copy of the curriculum chart can be found in the appendix of this article.

Curriculum Development and Implementation

Following their return from the National Summer Institute of Learning Communities, the team began the 2014-2015 academic year with continued energy and optimism for the newly created curriculum. In order to implement the proposed curriculum, the team started by seeking approval from the Vice President of Student Affairs and the Provost and Executive Director of Academic Affairs. The curriculum was well received by both and by their constituents. The LCAC quickly had support to move forward. This rapid success left council members a bit unsure about exactly how to pick up where they had left off prior to creating the curriculum and how, practically, to proceed with the newly created product.

The cornerstone of our curriculum was to create a multi-year plan for learning communities that creates and supports an intentional, integrative, and transformational experience for students. To ensure the experience was successful, the UNI staff developed a curriculum that is student centered, faculty led, and administratively supported. Further, the learning community curriculum contributes to the University of Northern Iowa's mission to create intentional, integrative, and transformational learning experiences, in which students thrive as they transition through college. The LC curriculum specifically supports learners as they acquire the ability to synthesize learning across multiple years. Consistent with UNI's mission, these experiences have the overall goals of developing and inspiring students to thrive while embracing challenge; to engage in critical inquiry and creative thought; and to become engaged citizens and scholars. Finally, the learning community curriculum will allow students to work on the following tasks throughout their tenure at the institution: academic and intellectual development; community and cultural engagement; and personal development.

Campus Partners

The LCAC team knew that, even with support from Provost and Vice President, they could not proceed without intentional outreach and relationship building across a wider network of campus partners. The opportunity to expand the reach of LCAC arose in the late fall of 2014 when actual restructuring of LCAC began (Workman & Redington, 2015). Faculty and administrators from the university's Liberal Arts Core (general education curriculum), Enrollment Management, Orientation, and New Student Programs are members of the LCAC or the newly created LLC programming council. Their place "at the table" has provided valuable insight, input, and support for the academic and residential initiatives.

This active partnership and collaboration on student success, coupled with intentional targeted efforts, has helped refine the LCAC. The joint effort has also provided much-needed (and appreciated) structure to move forward with implementation.

Department of Residence

The first entity to embrace the newly created curriculum was the Department of Residence (DOR). The department had previously been using a programming model known as PAWS (Personal, Academic, Wellness, and Social). The staff in the DOR identified many similarities between the PAWS model and the LC curriculum and, over the course of the year, developed a residential curriculum known as PAC, short for personal development; academic and intellectual development; and community and cultural engagement. The PAC curriculum directly connects to the LC curriculum and contains sub-curriculums for each specific type of LLC. Prior to the fall 2015 semester, several academic learning communities existed (e.g., business, biology, exploring majors) as well as the "Springboard" communities, which were designed to aid first year students in their transition to UNI. Beginning in fall 2015, all residential students were members of an LLC. The Springboard communities continued and expanded, newly created academic LLC options were implemented, and STEP (Second and Third Year Experience Program) communities were created to assist students in the *moving through* stage. Each type of community has its own sub-curriculum with the PAC model; each catered specifically to the community type. As an example, the PAC curriculum for Academic LLCs has been included in the appendix of this article. It provides not only the PAC model but also a timeline and expectations for Resident Assistants, since they are the front line staff who implement the curriculum.

First Year Only and Cornerstone Courses

With new campus partners at the table, the LCAC was able to provide support to the development of non-residential LCs in 2014-2015. Connected to the university's Liberal Arts Core, First Year Only (FYO) and Cornerstone were pre-existing courses that had natural ties to the LC curriculum. By design, the FYO course "connects first year students to a faculty member who will assist [them] through the transition to college, a peer teaching assistant who will serve as mentor inside and outside the classroom, and a tight-knit community of other first-year students who are also experiencing their first semester at UNI" (UNI, 2015, para. 7). Cornerstone is a "year-long course which allows first year students to take a course for a full academic year with the same professor, satisfying two Liberal Arts Core requirements. The course integrates topics of writing, speaking, civility, and student success within a vibrant classroom community. [Students] will also have access to a peer teaching assistant who will be there for all course sessions, providing mentoring and answering any questions [they] have about [their] college experience" (UNI, 2015, para. 7). While each specific course has learning objectives directly tied to its subject matter, it was determined that many of the LC goals and learning objectives already were being addressed or could easily be with minor curricular adjustments. As the LCAC continues to support FYO and Cornerstone courses, a more formal connection to the curriculum will be implemented. This connection will be documented in the revised academic master plan and noted on relevant webpages and other publications.

Lessons Learned

As we advance the LC initiatives campus-wide, members of the LCAC continue to learn valuable lessons for best practices. First, we have found there was not a clear understanding, even among LCAC members, of the purposes of the differing LCs or even how they were functioning. The most prominent example is faculty and administrators who are connected to LCs as a whole but not to specific LLCs. They did not have a clear understanding of what was happening in the residences halls, particularly with LLC development and implementation. We also found that assessment initiatives often overlapped and did not always gather information that was helpful to the LC program. Furthermore, the LCAC learned that the use of the term "curriculum" was not viewed positively by faculty. Some felt using that term could be perceived as dictating classroom curriculum, which has never been the purpose of the learning community program. In fall 2015, the LCAC responded to this problem by eliminating the reference to curriculum and renaming the document "Learning Community Goals and Objectives." While simply a nomenclature adjustment, this change has been received well by faculty partners, and, to date, those working

specifically with FYO and Cornerstone courses seem more willing to incorporate the LC Goals and Objectives into their curriculum.

Future Writings

As the UNI LLC program continues to grow, the authors plan to continue this series with a third and final article. The focus of the final article will be assessment initiatives and how the LCAC uses assessment results to improve LC practice. To date, UNI uses a combination of national surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI), and institution specific tools such as “House Surveys” conducted in residence halls. The combination of national benchmarking and internal assessment provides the team with the opportunity to compare our programs with LCs nationwide, examine areas we are doing well, and determine what we can do better. We hope that this second article has been helpful to readers and that they will continue to follow our journey through this program development. We acknowledge that our program is not perfect, but it has provided opportunities for learning and campus-wide partnerships for faculty and administrators. Finally, the LC and LLC initiatives have, most importantly, enriched the educational experiences of students.

References

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Appendix One

UNI Residential Learning Curriculum (Fall, 2015) Academic

Note: this document has been uploaded via the Supplemental Content Feature on the LCRP website.