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Learning communities & our culture of inquiry

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Abstract

At the heart of learning communities is a culture of inquiry, supported by research, practices from the field, and reflections, all of which contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Keywords

research, practices from the field, reflections, learning communities

Learning Communities & Our Culture of Inquiry

Welcome to the spring issue of the journal, which was crafted through the collaborative efforts of authors, reviewers, editors, and support staff. The authors in this issue demonstrate how learning communities, and their constituent high impact practices, positively affect student experiences and, further, how these practices inform an ethos of equity in the classroom—and beyond. At the journal, we thank our readers and writers for contributing to the growing corpus of scholarship that valorizes our lively culture of inquiry.

There are four *Research* articles in this issue, two of which focus on STEM learning communities. In "Long Term Benefits for Women in a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Living-Learning Community," Jennifer Maltby, Christopher Brooks, Marjorie Horton, and Helen Morgan (University of Michigan—Ann Arbor) establish that women who are first generation or members of under-represented minorities who participate in a one-year LLC are more likely to persist, attaining bachelor's degrees and continuing with graduate programs. In another study of STEM, Stephanie Sedberry Carrino and William J. Gerace (University of North Carolina at Greensboro) contributed "Why STEM Learning Communities Work: The Development of Psychosocial Learning Factors Through Social Interaction," which reports their findings from an illustrative case study of a 2-year STEM-based learning community. They conclude that psychosocial learning factors—such as metacognition and self-efficacy—are developed through the social interactions that are central to participation in learning communities. These studies of STEM conform with the growing body of evidence that learning communities impact retention and persistence. In "Beyond the Traditional Retention Data: A Qualitative Study of the Social Benefits of Living Learning Communities," Jill Arensdorf and Janett Naylor-Tincknell (Fort Hays State University) give voice to student experiences in a carefully crafted qualitative study. In their analysis of themes that emerged from focus groups, the authors found clear indications that participants in LLCs experienced richer connections to faculty and students, as well as more social and academic opportunities.

Finally, among the *Research* articles, Marcia Rapchak, Allison B. Brungard, and Theordore W. Berfelt (Duquesne University) offer some unexpected results in "What's the VALUE of Information Literacy? Comparing Learning Community and Non-Learning Community Student Learning Outcomes." They find that non-learning community students performed better than learning community students, whose transfer skills were nevertheless higher. Their discussion of these results focuses the reader's attention not only on research methodology but also on our assumptions about the value of teaching information literacy as an embedded component of a class.

In her *Perspectives* piece, Christy Ball (San Diego City College) describes the ways in which project-based learning cultivates a classroom ethos of inclusivity and cultural responsiveness. She notes that a flexible curriculum that addresses individual interests and passions not only deepens student engagement but also has the practical result of preparing students for real world challenges and opportunities. The salient point: fun is good!

The articles in *Practices from the Field* cohere in a common concern with faculty development as an integral part of student learning outcomes. In "A Workbook for

Designing, Building and Sustaining Learning Communities," Janine Graziano, Marissa Schlesinger, and Gabrielle Kahn (CUNY) and Rachel Singer (Achieving the Dream) describe how they created a workbook that documents the collaborative process of learning community work, with its values of "transparency, relationship building, integration, assessment, and reflection." The workbook, which emphasizes backward design, is published with the article. In the second of a three part series, "Developing a comprehensive learning community program: Implementing a learning community curriculum," Jamie L. Workman (University of Northern Iowa) and Lyn Redington (University of Iowa) stress the importance of intentional collaboration and partnerships, comprised of faculty and staff throughout the university, who 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". Again, faculty development supports the goal of a student-centered curriculum. Finally, in "Learning Communities Faculty Scholars: An Online, Targeted Faculty Development Course to Promote Scholarly Teaching," Hillary Steiner (Kennesaw State University) describes her online course that offers "just-in-time" instruction to learning community faculty about a range of salient challenges, including support of first years students, design of courses and assignments, and the fundamentals of pedagogy. Her course is based on a commitment to the idea that excellent teaching is founded in scholarship—a commitment that supports our mission for this journal and the continued development of learning communities.

The editors value the opportunity to work closely with authors to develop their submissions on the path to publication—and our reviewers play an essential role in that process. Although we look forward to hearing from prospective authors throughout the year, please keep in mind that, for the November issue, we will accept submissions until July 15th!