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The Roadmap Seminar: Preparing Students for Success in Learning Communities

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Abstract

With institutions of many types embracing the rich possibilities offered by course-based learning communities, it is important for programs to consider how they might best prepare students for success in those courses. Key to this work is identifying the particular skills needed and creating opportunities to introduce students to those skills before their learning community experiences. At Queens University of Charlotte, we have tackled this important issue by designing a transition course, the Roadmap Seminar, with components that introduce students to the three skills central to our learning communities: integrative thinking, teamwork, and metacognition. Using mid-semester surveys of students and faculty, learning outcomes assessment, student course performance, and end of semester evaluations, our initial results of this approach are positive. Student work has shown the conscious development of integrative thinking and heightened awareness of how they function as part of a team. This framework provides an opportunity for other institutions to consider how they can prepare students with the specific skills that will make their learning communities truly high impact experiences.

Keywords

integrative thinking, first-year seminar

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

While learning communities vary across institutions, in this essay, we suggest that most programs can be strengthened by intentionally preparing students for success in those high impact environments. To do this work, we identified two important questions: What are the particular skills that are most important for student success in an institution's learning communities? And can programs embed an experience that prepares students to learn these essential skills? At Queens University of Charlotte, we reimagined the general education curriculum for the entire institution so that learning communities built around small clusters of thematically linked courses are now its defining feature. Here, we offer one possible approach to the important issue of preparation: a dedicated transition-style seminar course that all incoming students take in their first semester titled "Roadmap: Welcome to Queens."

Connecting HIPs¹_{SEP}

In 2102 Queens began to reinvent the general education curriculum as part of a larger university strategic planning process intended to raise academic program quality and to improve student retention and success. The faculty revised the general education curriculum so that all undergraduates could choose among a variety of learning communities. Now students are required to enroll in a learning community at the 100-, 200-, and 300-course level and to conclude their experience with an integrated capstone. In this way, we ensured not only that students would be familiar with the collaborative learning and integrative skill building that define a good learning community experience but also that they would have the opportunity to develop and practice those habits repeatedly during their college careers. All students start at a single entry point, the Roadmap seminar. Taught by faculty from across the university, this two-credit hour graded course has two goals: to support students' transition to the university and to introduce them to the key concepts and skills they will need to be successful in the learning communities. While the course attends to these twin goals, the emphasis placed on integrative thinking and metacognition means that it functions more as what Ryan and Glenn (2004) classify as a strategy-based seminar rather than a campus socialization seminar. After completing the Roadmap class, all students move into their first Queens learning community in the subsequent semester.

The most common structure for supporting students in learning communities is to integrate first-year seminars as part of a learning community (Andrade, 2007; Chism & Graziano, 2016; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013). However, the Summer Bridge Academy at IUPUI stands out as one of the few examples of a program that provided students with advance preparation. Students in the IUPUI program who completed this optional pre-learning community summer bridge experience had higher grades in the learning communities than students who did not participate (Chism, Baker, Hansen, & Williams, 2008). In a similar way, the structure of our general education curriculum gave us an opportunity to help students develop the skills they would need to be more successful in the thematically linked course clusters in which they would subsequently enroll. But in order for us to leverage the Roadmap course, we needed to identify the kinds of experiences that could best prepare our students to engage in the work of our learning communities.

Building our “Roadmap”^[SEP]

Before we launched our Roadmap seminar, we had the opportunity to explore what types of experiences would best prepare our students for learning communities. We piloted learning communities that provided valuable insights into the different kinds of learning that would be required of our students. Halfway through the pilot semester, we surveyed the faculty and students, asking for feedback about their experiences. Faculty were asked about what was going well and what was challenging about teaching in their learning communities. We also asked for their input about support that we could offer in the second half of the semester. In the same vein, students enrolled in the pilot learning communities were surveyed about what was going well and what impediments that they had encountered. We invited their feedback about practical improvements that might benefit their learning in the remainder of the term. And we welcomed any general comments they wished to offer. At the end of term, we utilized our course evaluation system to offer students another feedback opportunity, and we debriefed with pilot faculty through faculty development activities. Albeit in different terms, faculty and students focused on two themes: the desire to be better at making meaningful connections across learning community courses and the desire to understand how to work productively in learning community teams. This feedback helped us decide that the Roadmap seminar should introduce and provide low stakes experiences with three key areas: metacognition, integration, and teamwork.

Based on the insights from our learning community pilot, we created two assignments that emphasized these three skills: a learning journal and a “passions” project. Spanning the entire semester, the journal assignment uses chapters from Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Students Do* (2012) as well as guided reflective prompts to help students recognize and examine their own metacognitive habits and processes. For example, one prompt asks students to consider Bain’s (2012) statement that “you don’t learn from experience, you learn from reflecting on experience” (p. 163) and his discussion of complex or “messy” problems. The prompt then asks them to “think of a time you have had to examine a complex problem. How did working with that problem affect your perspective?” In the passions project, students evaluate their individual interests and identify a topic that they would like to research. Subsequently, they are placed into diverse teams and work together to identify meaningful connections between the “passion” topics of all group members. Finally, they develop complex questions based on those connections and conduct preliminary research on potential approaches to addressing their “messy” or “wicked” problems (Bain, 2012). Through this scaffolded assignment, instructors explicitly introduce the concept of integrative thinking and provide multiple, low stakes opportunities to practice this skill.

During the Roadmap seminar, we purposefully integrated the passion projects with the learning journal assignment to encourage metacognitive reflection on teamwork. Students are asked to use their journals to reflect on principles of collaborative learning discussed in class and the working dynamics of their passions project teams. For instance, in preparation for teamwork, students read a short text about collaborative learning practices and then respond to a journal prompt that asks: “What do you expect will be challenging about collaborative work? What will you bring to your group? What will you need from your group?” Once the groups have been at work for several weeks, a reflective prompt then asks: “Do you think you work better on your own or in group? Given the work so far of your assigned group in this course, what have you learned that you would not have learned on your own?” At the end of the term, students cap what they have learned about reflecting on process by evaluating each team member and the group. These evaluations are guided by contracts that the students crafted at the outset of their projects.

By the end of the semester, students in the Roadmap seminar have had significant experiences in integration, collaborative learning practices, and metacognitive awareness. In other words, we intentionally gear these assignments to provide students with a strong foundation to enter into the environments of our learning communities in which they will work in groups across classes that are intentionally clustered by shared themes addressing complex issues.

Our initial assessments^[L1]_[SEP]

We are encouraged by the outcomes of the assignments that we designed for the Roadmap seminar. In final reflection essays, students have been able to articulate specific ways in which the passions project enhanced their self-awareness and ability to navigate teamwork. As one student wrote:

“I had the chance of seeing how well I do under pressure and with working with different personalities. I learned that I am not really a great leader, but when there is conflict I do advocate for peace. Since working on the group project, I now try to find the deeper connection to literally everything. Everything has meaning and somehow is connected.”

(Student A final essay, December 2016)

Another student commented about his group:

“we all had different mindsets and backgrounds coming into this. Whether it was one of gender, athletics, or if you are an incoming freshman or a transfer. They all help towards gaining a new understanding together and answering the complex questions which your group may have on a certain topic.” (Student B final essay, December 2016)

By the end of the term, students are also identifying increased comfort with the concept of integrative thinking and greater understanding of its value:

“My passion topic was health/medicine and my group members’ were the environment and nutrition. At first, we thought it was going to be really difficult to relate these three things. Health and nutrition tied together well, but we didn’t know how to tie in the environment. We ended up coming with three connections: genetically modified foods, plastic packaging, and organic foods. These encompassed our topics really well. We were able to come up with great complex questions from these connections and ended up with a great presentation. Throughout the project I learned a lot about myself as a group member.” (Student C final essay, December 2016)

Another student, whose passion topic was global warming, reflected on her group experience and her increased understanding of integration:

“Taking an integrative approach has allowed me to look at both the individual components and the whole project. I had never thought about the idea that global warming could connect to things such as pay equity or music. By discovering these connections, it expanded my understanding of my topic. I saw how global warming didn’t only affect the earth, but also the economy, your quality of life, your psychological state, and much more. I never thought about the fact that everything is in some way connected to everything else until I used this integrative approach on this project. This has been such an incredible learning experience and I am so thankful for the effect it has had on me. Understanding that everything connects will allow me to see more connections in the future.” (Student D learning journal, December 2016)

On the broader question of whether the Roadmap experience is impacting student success in learning communities as intended, we need more time and assessment before we can offer a

conclusive answer. That said, we do have early indicators that this approach is preparing students for our learning communities. Having run the pilot program in spring 2015, we are able to compare student performance from that term, in which students had no preparatory experience before enrolling in learning communities, to that of students enrolled in learning communities in 2015-2016. In fall 2015, all incoming first-year students enrolled in the Roadmap seminar, and then in spring 2016, they all enrolled in learning communities. Since many of the same faculty repeated their course offerings in both the spring 2015 pilot and the spring 2016 launch, we are able to compare student performance in these learning communities by course. The percentage of A's in those courses increased by nearly 20% on average after the Roadmap seminar. One faculty member described her experience this way, "they were the most 'prepared' for class each day of all the students I have taught. I didn't have to do my usual 'this is how to be successful in class' talk. From day one—they were ready to go. I specifically asked them 'why' and they told me that they learned it in Roadmap." (J. Daniel personal communication, June 18, 2017)

Even before the curriculum revision, the first course in general education was one of the university's biggest barrier courses, with the third highest number of failing course grades and sixth highest number of course withdrawals. In contrast, with Roadmap positioned as the first course in general education, we have seen a markedly different trajectory with normal grade distributions and course completion rates. Indeed, since we launched Roadmap, the retention rate of our first-year students has gone from 74.2% in 2015 to 78.4% in 2017. Because we have undertaken other retention-related initiatives during this time, this promising change cannot be attributed solely to this one new experience. But, it seems reasonable to conclude that Roadmap has contributed to the improved success rate.

Finally, in the spring of 2016, we began our first program-level assessment of the new general education and focused it particularly on our integrative learning outcome. Scoring results of student work artifacts indicate that the majority of students in 100-level learning communities reached the intended milestone on our integrative skill rubric. While that is a promising start, we are currently at work on developing and implementing more direct, finely-tuned measures that can help us better pinpoint the impact of the Roadmap preparation experience on 100-level learning community student performance.

Conclusion SEP

In the third year of our ambitious general education program, we have learned many lessons about course-based learning community development, implementation, and assessment. Among the most important lessons is how we identified the skills that would best enable students to be successful in our particular versions of learning communities. Faculty and program administrators were able to define the characteristics of our learning communities done well—what they looked like when they were truly high impact learning experiences—and were able to scaffold student learning outcomes backwards into our Roadmap seminar so that students could be equipped to make the most of out of their first learning community experience.

By sharing our experiences, we hope to encourage other learning community programs to consider how they might consider preparing students for success in their courses. While each program's approach will be framed within its own institutional context and goals, the opportunity is the same across all programs: to deliver on the rich promise of this particular high impact practice for enhancing and transforming the learning experiences of all our students.

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