

*Michael Stebleton,
Nick Nownes
Writing and the
World of Work:
An Integrative
Learning
Community Model
at a Two-Year
Institution*

Learning community (LC) programs continue to proliferate across college campuses as a strategy to engage and retain students. Although evidence exists to suggest increased levels of social engagement among LC participants, there is an ongoing debate about the impact on student academic engagement and intellectual development. This article describes a learning community effort at a community college between an English composition faculty member and a faculty counselor who teaches a life-career planning course. A primary objective of this collaboration was to promote deeper student integrative learning. Students in the LC engaged in the process through writing, reflection, and self-assessment based on issues related to work in a pluralistic society. Theoretical concepts and practical implications are analyzed and shared.

Learning communities (LC) continue to gain momentum across university and college campuses as a strategy to address critical issues of college student engagement and persistence (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). Much of the research has been conducted on living-learning communities primarily at four-year campuses (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). More recently, community colleges have implemented comparable LC programs (Scrivener, Bloom, LeBlanc, Paxson, Rouse, & Sommo, 2008). Inver

Hills Community College (IHCC), located in the southeastern suburbs of Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN, is one such institution that integrated an institutional-wide learning community program. Despite the popularity of learning community initiatives, questions still abound about the long-term effectiveness of such programs. Do LC's deliver on their intended objectives? What are the potential benefits to student learning and cognitive development? What are the tenets of successful learning community practices in terms of faculty collaboration? The purpose of this article is three-fold: (a) to explore the theoretical foundation and outcomes of LC's as a pedagogical tool; (b) to highlight a LC program at Inver Hills Community College that successfully integrates a composition course with a life-career planning class; and (c) to discuss implications and practical recommendations regarding partnerships in LC campus efforts.

Inver Hills Community College currently serves over 8,500 students and overall enrollment is on the incline. Approximately 38% of full-time students are first-generation learners; 18% are students of color; 61% are female; and a majority of students need to complete developmental coursework in reading, writing, and/or math. Several years ago, IHCC administrators noted a precipitous decline in terms of student persistence and academic success. Retention rates for fall-to-spring semester were, on average, below 70%, and graduation rates were an unimpressive 15%. In an effort to engage students more fully and enhance overall persistence rates, a comprehensive first-year experience program highlighted by learning communities was piloted in 2005-2006. The focus of the LC program was first-generation learners and students of color, key target populations for this type of initiative (Jehangir, 2009). The stated immediate charge from key administrators at the state level was clear: IHCC needs to improve student graduation rates. The more immediate objectives needed to focus on student engagement and success, and learning communities appeared to be a logical intervention.

An overarching objective of learning communities is to promote student academic and social engagement (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). *Academic engagement* typically refers to student investment in the classroom experience, interaction with faculty, time spent studying, academic achievement, and involvement in high-impact educational practices such as learning communities, first-year seminars, common book experiences, service learning, and others (Kuh, 2008). *Social engagement* refers to students' social investment in the collegiate experience: meeting new friends, participating in student groups or leisure activities, and getting socially involved

(Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). The LC planning team at IHCC (composed of administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals) intended our program would realize gains in both areas. A large and growing body of research has established that learning communities do, indeed, facilitate student social engagement: students enrolled in learning communities are retained at higher rates, interact with other students more frequently both in and out of the classroom, and report an overall greater satisfaction with their college experience compared to non-participants (Smith et al., 2004).

Whether or not students experience greater academic engagement or progress is less clear. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), for example, states clearly that “participating in learning communities is uniformly and positive linked with student academic performance, engagement in educationally fruitful activities (such as academic integration, active and collaborative learning, and interaction with faculty members)” (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, p. 124). There are skeptics of the effectiveness of learning communities, and the underlying shortcomings of such problems likely fall on the shoulders of faculty members and other well-intended staff. Mendelson (2006) explored the gap between the promises of the learning community model and actual learning community practices. The reality, in his experience as learning community coordinator at Iowa State University, did not fully meet expectations: “Good teachers continued to do good work, sometimes collaboration with other teachers spawned interesting assignments, but mostly, linked courses ran parallel to each other and the prospect of integrated courses as a context for reflective thinking remained unrealized” (Mendelson, 2006, p. 58). In other words, many LC’s lacked intentional integration (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). Browne and Minnick (2005) articulated a comparable point: “Learning communities tend to stop at goals of social networking and retention without moving on to the types of cognitive goals traditionally associated with the academy” (p. 779). In sum, it can be argued that many learning community programs meet social engagement objectives, but often do not meet expected outcomes related to intellectual and cognitive development.

How can faculty members, developmental educators, and student affairs practitioners (e.g., academic advisers/counselors, learning center directors, writing and tutoring center professionals, multicultural center directors and staff) become more involved in learning community efforts? How can instructors create classrooms that ask students to learn in collaboration with peers and faculty and, ultimately, strengthen critical thinking skills by exposing students to multiple perspectives on

integrative core topics? The authors of this article—an English faculty member and a faculty counselor who specializes in career development and career planning issues—partnered to create and deliver a learning community that would aim to accomplish the larger intended goals of social engagement and academic engagement as well as integrative learning across disciplines.

Structuring the Course

Among the offerings available to students, we proposed a learning community linking a required first-semester English composition class (college-level; non-developmental) with a life-career planning course. The rationale for offering life-career planning is straightforward: most students enter college, both at two-year and four-year institutions, without a clear direction in terms of major and career choice. Many undergraduate students change their majors multiple times, leading to delayed graduation and entrance into the workforce. Often, this vacillation is due to a lack of thoughtful reflection about values, interests, and skill sets. Students need to be prepared to engage in a thorough planning process, including knowing how and where to access valuable occupational information (Severy, 2008). Much like composition, life-career planning is chiefly a process-oriented class; students hone a set of skills through reflection, application, and practice. In other words, students become competent users of numerous career and educational planning resources, and, ultimately, acquire the tools to identify and explore career options. It should be noted that the life-career planning course has been successfully integrated with developmental writing and reading courses at IHCC, including learning communities designed for English language learners (e.g., recent immigrant students, refugees, and international students).

Early in the collaboration, a specific point of possible engagement became apparent. The arc of the life-career planning class moves from individual, introspective work to a consideration of the larger world of work and its varied complexities. Students would begin the semester by completing a series of assignments designed to clarify personal interests, values, strengths, and aptitudes. *Work values* refer to how individuals feel about the work itself and the contribution it makes to society. This movement from reflection to social engagement is likely familiar to writing and reading educators. James Moffett's (1996) concept of a *universe of discourse*, for example, suggests that student writing should move from "self to world, from a point to an area, from a private world of egocentric chatter to a public universe of discourse" (p. 27). According to Moffett, an appropriate sequence of composition assignments progresses from

first-person assignments written for concrete, immediately available audiences, to more formal assignments written for an abstract audience of readers unknown to the writer.

Moffett's universe of discourse also allows for points of intersection between composition instruction and learning community theory. Moffett links rhetorical development to cognitive development: "According to Piaget, and Vygotsky agrees with him, the early egocentric speech of the child becomes gradually 'socialized' and adapts itself to other people. At the same time his mental outlook decenters, that is, he gradually yields up his initial, emotionally preferred vantage point, and expands his perspective so as to include many other points of view" (p. 27). This concept from Piaget correlates effectively with the underlying rationale for learning communities, which are designed to strengthen critical thinking skills by exposing students to various dissonant and convergent perspectives on the same issues.

The learning community discussed in this article was titled *Exploring the World of Work through Reflective Writing*, and aimed to intentionally move students from self to world, from reflection to ethical action, primarily through purposeful and intensive reflective writing and research activities. Students were asked to study and participate in the wider community through learning, reading, and writing about issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, and other issues as they related to living and working in a pluralistic society. The integration of ideas across disciplines was emphasized, and students were offered multiple occasions for demonstrating the ability to apply course concepts and ideas, and for explicitly drawing the pieces into a whole. Both instructors were committed to active, inquiry-oriented classroom activities, collaborative learning, and the use of small groups. The two courses were closely integrated with several shared learning objectives and common assignments. Each instructor maintained his own class and syllabus, yet a concerted effort was made to integrate concepts and objectives between the two courses.

Course Content and Expectations

Students began the career-life planning course with a sequence of assignments designed to foster student self-awareness. Self-awareness, including values clarification—the active reflection on what is most important in one's life—is a critical component of the career planning process (Colozzi, 2003). Students began the composition class reading *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich's investigation of the low-wage workplace (2001). Students learned the anthropological concept of *participant observation*, the idea of being actively engaged in a community

or new situation without being a full-fledged member. Following Ehrenreich's example, students wrote as participant-observers, undertaking an ethnographic study of low-wage, low-status, workplaces they had encountered. Using observations from Barbara Ehrenreich's discovery that workers took pride even in low-wage, low-status jobs, students were given a specific research question: "How do you and your co-workers find satisfaction and meaning in jobs devalued by society?" Returning to class with their first set of field notes, students were astonished to discover that, upon reflection, they did, in fact, *care* about their jobs, and so did their co-workers. They worried, for example, about pleasing dictatorial bosses, or fretted over the repetitive, mundane tasks they had been assigned. Some students wondered how they might make their own service-oriented jobs more engaging and rewarding (Florida, 2010).

The *Exploring the Low-Wage Workplace* component was a suitable starting point for a sequence of assignments designed to facilitate Moffett's progression. Students began the assignment with a series of journal entries in the English composition course describing their own experiences in the workplace. They turned these observations into a report shared with their classmates and their instructors. We were satisfied that this assignment furthered the larger goals of the learning community. The value-clarification exercises were explicitly integrated to the larger reality of living and working in a pluralistic society, helping students develop cultural competencies in an increasingly diverse workplace. Students discovered that individual personal values might come into conflict with the values—social, economic, and political—governing the low wage, service-dominated workplace. In turn, larger discussions asked students to reconsider their initial responses to the career assignments. Some students, for example, came to question whether making a great deal of money was, in fact, more important than making a difference in a helping profession such as teaching or health care.

In the composition classroom, an occupational research project became the foundation for a more extensive, formal research assignment. Building on a semester's worth of both guided and independent research, the final research assignment asked students to apply the information they had gathered to a particular problem, solution, or policy related to an occupation they were interested in pursuing. A student interested in elementary education, for example, opted to investigate the political and social controversies surrounding teachers unions and pending school closings, while another student who aspired to a career as an entertainer researched how peer-to-peer file sharing had affected the music industry. With this final assignment, certain benefits of the learning community model negotiated at the start of the semester became

evident. Students began the assignment aware, to whatever extent, that research wasn't an arcane, purposeless activity. They drew on their own expertise, learning, and personal experiences, an important aspect of college student development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Perhaps most rewarding, the authors could often see students drawing on their previous experiences in the classes to understand the problem at hand (i.e., students began to connect the links between key concepts in both courses).

Overall, the learning community was considered a significant success based on retention data and focus group interviews. Additionally, the authors conducted focus group interviews with all students. Retention rates were outstanding (one student withdrew around midterm), and grades were on par if not better than other stand-alone classes. Fall-to-spring retention data for the LC program at IHCC overall continues to be over 85% for most cohorts; some groups topped 90%. Most recently, the fall-to-spring 2008-2009 retention rates for students of color in the LC program was 88%; fall-to-spring was 73%. In comparison, the non-LC students of color cohort had retention rates of 71% and 52%, respectively. The program is meeting students' needs as well as the institution's goals of student retention. Overwhelmingly, students stated that they liked the interaction of the LC as well as the social and academic activities planned throughout the semester. Since the pilot program, the LC initiative has expanded at IHCC and the efforts continue to be financially supported through internal and external monies. A scholarship program was recently added to assist students in financial need. During the spring semester of 2010, 10 learning community groups were offered. The plan for fall semester 2010 will be to develop and implement 16 different learning communities.

Lessons Learned and Implications

First, the authors of this article strongly believe that faculty members involved in the LC initiative need to make students more aware of the curricular and pedagogical connections of the program. These integration points between disciplines (including learning objectives and outcomes) need to be clear and articulated to students throughout the process. For example, the authors articulated to students on the first day of instruction why the two courses (composition and life-career planning) were selected for this particular experience. Furthermore, instructors should try to make appearances in each other's classes, perhaps even engaging in several integrated activities or full class sessions. Again, intentional integration of the disciplines, including key concepts, can be powerful for students (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008).

Second, instructors can be encouraged to embed active learning into all aspects of the course, including outside learning activities. The role of experiential education should not be undermined (Kolb, 1984). The authors intentionally asked students to take concepts from the classroom and readings and then apply it to their lives. Additionally, this LC model allowed for regular outside opportunities to interact with students. For example, another minor yet relevant component of the program was a weekend-long trip to an experiential outdoor learning center on a lake about 90 miles outside of campus. The outdoor experiential curriculum gave students the chance to bond with each other and allowed the faculty members to apply concepts to the outdoor experience. The role of teamwork in a high ropes course, for example, was related to the group interaction needed in the workplace (e.g., development of interpersonal skills; communication skills). This student experience helped contribute to the overall social engagement within the community.

Third, faculty members who teach in learning community groups should collaborate and partner with professionals in the writing center, tutorial services, and other on-campus resources. Instructional faculty can accomplish this goal in several ways: (a) invite staff into the classroom to conduct a workshop and/or discuss services; (b) provide copies of writing assignments and examples of papers to student affairs professionals; and (c) help students see writing, editing, and reading as a process; not a one-time event (comparable to the life-career planning process). Instructors can encourage students to use the resources available to them throughout the semester. Students often carry misperceptions about student support services, including writing center and tutorial assistance (e.g., only unsuccessful or needy students seek out this type of support). Faculty members need to correct these examples of stereotypes by encouraging all LC students to utilize. One of the authors (Stebbleton) of this article stresses repeatedly to his students that it is often the *best* students (i.e., the students that want to become stronger writers) that use the services to continually hone their skills (Nownes & Stebleton, 2010).

Fourth, professionals who work in learning centers, tutorial services, peer assistance learning programs, and other student affairs capacities might consider teaching or co-teaching in a learning community. For example, IHCC offers a one-credit *Student Success* course that includes a mastery of study skills, including time management and planning (Downing, 2008). Instructors and students can directly apply the study enhancement tools to their other courses in the learning community. Furthermore, Stuart Hunter and Murray (2007) advocated for student affairs professionals to become more actively engaged in teaching

opportunities, especially in activities in the first-year experience program. Assuming new teaching roles can expand the professional development portfolios of student service practitioners as well as contribute to the success of the learning community program on respective campuses.

Fifth, it is important to realize that successful learning community programs involve the entire institution. Most learning community programs that are built on the shoulders of a single person or department will *not* be sustainable in the long run. There are multiple stakeholders in a LC initiative, including those that do invaluable work in student affairs-related functions including, but not limited to, tutoring services, learning centers, and peer tutoring models. It is vital that cohesive collaboration takes place between academic and student affairs in order to enhance success of the program (Stebbleton & Schmidt, 2010). Moreover, students will more fully benefit from a LC program if a range of faculty and staff members from diverse disciplines opt to participate. One concern is that the same participants get tapped repeatedly to engaged in new and innovative programming; this often can lead to staff burnout and resentment if others do not eventually take the initiative. Lastly, academic institutions, including IHCC, need to continue to engage in ongoing assessment and evaluation of retention initiatives (Oburn, 2005). These processes can be conducted through internal strategies and/or by hiring external consultants; the overarching goal is to build a culture of evidence to provide support for interventions.

Despite some of the challenges and pitfalls of potential LC involvement, the authors benefited from this opportunity to work closely together in a way that stretched us in new and exciting ways. Other faculty members have commented that their LC involvement has re-energized them and taught them to work with students in new ways not considered previously. The learning community model is ideal for community colleges and other two-year institutions because the missions of both are congruent: access, inclusion, engagement, persistence, and ultimately, student success. Developed and implemented successfully, the impact of learning communities on students can be especially powerful, if not life changing. Educators at all levels can help students become even more successful by getting actively involved with retention efforts, including learning communities, at postsecondary institutions.

References

- Browne, M. N., & Minnick, K. J. (2005). The unnecessary tension between learning communities and intellectual growth. *College Student Journal*, 39, 775-783.
- Colozzi, E. A. (2003). Depth-oriented values extraction. *Career Development Quarterly*, 52, 180-189.
- Downing, S. (2008). *On course: Strategies for creating success in college and in life* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2001). *Nickel and dimed: On not getting by in America*. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company.
- Engstrom, C., & Tinto, V. (2007). *Pathways to student success: The impact of learning communities on the success of academically under-prepared college students*. Unpublished manuscript for William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Florida, R. (2010). *The great reset: How new ways of living and working drive post-crash prosperity*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Jehangir, R. (2009). Cultivating voice: First-generation students seek full academic citizenship in multicultural learning communities. *Innovative Higher Education*, 34(1), 33-49. doi: 10.1007/s10755-008-9089-5
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Lardner, E., & Malnarich, G. (2008). A new era in learning: Why the pedagogy of intentional integration matters. *Change*, 40(4), 30-37.
- Mendelson, M. (2006). Confessions of a learning community coordinator. *Liberal Education*, 92(3), 56-59.
- Moffett, J. (1996). I, you, and it. In M. Wiley, B. Gleason, & L. W. Phelps (Eds.), *Composition in four keys: Inquiring in to the field* (pp. 24-28). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Nownes, N., & Stebleton, M. J. (2010). Reflective writing and life-career planning: Extending the learning in a learning community model. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 38, 118-131.
- Oburn, M. (2005). Building a culture of evidence in student affairs. In S. R. Helfgot & M. M. Culp (Eds.), *New directions for community colleges* (Vol. 131, pp. 19-32). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Scrivener, S., Bloom, D., LeBlanc, A., Paxson, C., Rouse, C. E., & Sommo, C. (2008). A good start: Two-year effects of a freshmen learning community program at Kingsborough Community College. New York, NY: MDRC.

- Severy, L. E. (2008). Analysis of an online career narrative intervention: "What's my story?" *The Career Development Quarterly, 56*, 268-273.
- Smith, B. L., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R. S., & Gabelnick, F. (2004). *Learning communities: Reforming undergraduate education*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Stebleton, M. J., & Schmidt, L. (2010). Building bridges: Community college practitioners as retention leaders. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 47*, 78-98.
- Stuart Hunter, M., & Murray, K. A. (2007). New frontiers for student affairs professionals: Teaching and the first-year experience. *New Directions for Student Services, 117*, 25-34.
- Wild, L., & Ebbers, L. (2002). Rethinking student retention in community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 26*, 503-519.
- Wolf-Wendel, L., Ward, K., & Kinzie, J. (2009). A tangled web of terms: The overlap and unique contribution of involvement, engagement, and integration to understanding college student success. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*, 407-428.
- Zhao, C. M., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education, 45*, 115-138.

Michael J. Stebleton, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning (PsTL) at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. He is actively involved in the first-year experience course and related college initiatives, including learning communities. Prior to assuming a faculty role, he worked in career and academic services for approximately 15 years. Stebleton's research and teaching interests include: college student development, career development, and multicultural college student success issues. He is the lead author on an upcoming, newly-edited career text: *Hired: Job-Hunting/Career-Planning Guide (4ed.)*.

Nick Nounes teaches English at Inver Hills Community College in suburban St. Paul, Minnesota, where he has conducted research in the writing process and the use of literature in the composition classroom.