

## Who leads learning communities?

The most robust and sustainable learning community initiatives are led by collaborative leadership teams. Learning community initiatives that rely on one(or in our case two) heroic individual are often vulnerable, especially when the workload and leadership are not widely shared. Successful learning community implementation requires extensive cross-unit coordination among:

- faculty members
- vice president for student affairs and staff
- academic advisors
- admissions and orientation staff members
- the registrar's office
- individuals who develop the institution's course catalog and those who schedule classroom space
- senior academic leaders
- individuals involved with assessment.

Learning communities should also involve:

- librarians
- computer technology specialists
- students
- representatives of the institution's teaching and learning or faculty development center.

Critical elements for developing learning community initiatives include:

- an impetus for change
- administrative support
- a leadership team that includes both academic and student affairs
- a shared vision and comprehensive view
- a strategic plan and yearly planning calendar
- inclusive planning
- student-focused goals
- faculty involvement
- an evaluation and assessment plan
- information and resource networks
- budget and space
- incentives and rewards

## What do they cost?

Costs involved in learning community development and delivery vary widely and depend on the configuration of each program. Some or all of the following direct and indirect are often involved:

- Start-up costs including planning meetings and external consultation to stimulate conversation and provide advice
- Publicity to faculty, advisors and prospective learning community student participants
- Reduced or altered enrollment configurations
- Assessment and evaluation resources
- Undergraduate peer facilitators
- Special field trips, cultural activities or guest speakers
- Faculty/staff development, events and activities
- Special classroom construction or renovation
- Renovation of residence halls for residential learning communities, including the construction of residential classrooms or planning rooms
- Additional training for advisors
- Software costs for cohort registration
- Annual faculty/staff retreats or institutes, for planning and reflection

Many learning communities are launched with funds from outside granting agencies, although an impressive number have been developed entirely *with reallocated internal resources*. Most are sustained and grow with internal resources after grants end.

### **How do we fund them?**

Learning communities are usually funded just like any other academic course-out of the college budget. The principle cost, of course, is for the salaries of the instructor(s). It makes a difference who the teachers are since salaries of instructors vary widely.

The actual cost of learning communities depends upon the LC model used. If a learning community has enrollment limits similar to stand alone classes, there is little additional cost incurred. In most institutions the average undergraduate class size is about 25 students to 1 faculty. Therefore a team taught learning community that is the equivalent of two courses would need to have 50 students to meet this average. Actual teaching loads vary considerably between institutions and within institutions. Historical resource deployment patterns, unfortunately, often use large first year classes as a means of subsidizing faculty research, low teaching loads, and small upper division courses. Since the first year is when student attrition rates are highest, this is not a wise way to deploy resources if student success matters.

***The best approach is to build learning communities into the college budget.***

Generally speaking, the larger the program, the more it has to correspond to the existing political economy of the institution or negotiate a new allocation pattern. Grants have been used to start some programs, but this is an unsustainable pattern of long-term funding and can create unrealistic expectations. It is better to regard grants as quality enhancement funds that can help with faculty development or other needs. Looking for local grants to

fund student projects, service learning, community outreach, etc. is a good option. Some institutions have also found community sponsors for LC scholarships and for student research. In one institution, we know about the president establish a LC scholarship fund given in the name of one of the LC faculty each year as well as a paid sabbatical focusing on LCs.

Title III and V grants from the Department of Education have also funded many LCs. These are complex, omnibus projects to improve student success funded by the Federal Department of Education.

In addition to grants, others ways that institutions have funded learning communities and justified funding levels include the following:

- Using tuition waivers or work study funds to support LC program scholarships or for peer mentors for LCs, i.e. **the Goodrich Scholarship Program at the University of Nebraska-Omaha**.
- Charging additional fees for living-learning communities through the residence life programs, i.e. at the **University of Wisconsin** and the University of Colorado.
- *Establishing partnerships within the institution that bring resources from other parts of the college budget to the LC effort. Some LCs have been focused on athletes, for example. Others involve collaborations with the Library, Information Technology, Student Affairs, Institutional Research or the Center for Teaching and Learning.*
- Demonstrating substantial return on investment, efficiency and effectiveness in terms of enhanced retention and degree completion. Tuition saved is real money and the cost of very small upper division courses is high. The institution will benefit if it can retain more students in some of these high cost fields.
- Demonstrating efficiency and educational effectiveness by developing a more pointed and shorter general education program than the distribution system typically provides. **Portland State University** made this argument.
- Increasing institutional profits and improving campus climate through living-learning programs that increase occupancy rates and decrease police incident rates.
- Increasing faculty vitality and improving teaching practices through team teaching in LCs.