Learning Communities
Promising Model for Preparing Low-Skilled Students to Succeed in College

What is a learning community?

At their core, learning communities involve “co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together” (Tinto, 1998). In practice, learning communities vary in scope and services. Some provide courses linked by a common theme while others offer academic and student supports embedded in the linked courses.

At the three colleges already selected for the Learning Communities Demonstration, the learning communities are as follows:

- At Hillsborough Community College (Tampa, FL), students will take a developmental reading course that is linked with a college success course. The courses will be blocks scheduled; student will take the courses as a group.
- At Queensborough Community College (Queens, NY), students will take a developmental math course linked to a developmental English course or standard college-level course as a group.
- At Kingsborough Community College (Brooklyn, NY), students will take two courses that are required for their major and a 1-credit “integrative seminar” as a group. Teachers in the learning communities will coordinate lessons and assignments.

What are the potential benefits?

Many authors assert that learning communities offer multiple benefits to students:

- Makes developmental classes more engaging and meaningful
- Allows for deeper understanding and integration of the course materials
- Builds critical thinking skills
- Fosters greater opportunity to build a community of peers and instructors
- Creates a supportive and personalized learning environment
- Strengthens students’ attachment and engagement to the institution
- Socializes them to the expectations of college
- Increases rates of retention and persistence, course grades, and attainment of postsecondary credentials.

(Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1998; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004; Tinto, 1998; Shapiro and Levine, 1999)

Our previous research

In the Opening Doors study, MDRC used an experimental design to evaluate the learning communities at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn.

The learning communities at KCC:

- Incoming freshmen were targeted
- 25 students were grouped together for first semester courses
- Three courses were linked: English, student development, and one standard college course
- Faculty were required to coordinate assignments and discuss student progress

Early conclusions:

- More course credits were completed
- No improvement in continued enrollment was shown

(Bloom, D., and Sommo, C. 2005.)

One Year Later: No Difference in College Enrollment

(Bloom, D., and Sommo, C. 2005.)

Student Comments:

- “My classmates are a big help, too. By... having the same classes with the same people, we can go each other for help.”

- “It’s a great idea to combine English and Reading. When we read our text, we are able to understand what’s being said... I am able to write more comfortably than before...”

Bibliography


