Improving Student Engagement & Academic Achievement
Learning Communities as an Intervention Strategy

❖ **Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich**
Co-Directors,
Washington Center for Improving the
Quality of Undergraduate Education,
The Evergreen State College

www.evergreen.edu/washcenter

Session Outline

❖ Learning communities as an intervention strategy

❖ Key findings from MDRC Demonstration Project

❖ Essential elements of designing an intervention strategy with learning communities

❖ How are HBCUs using learning communities?

❖ Invitation to register your learning community in the National LC Directory

---

Learning Communities as an Intervention Strategy

❖ Identify where students are "at risk" in the curriculum using institutional data, i.e. curricular trouble spots

❖ Site learning communities where student need is greatest

❖ Design integrative assignments that intentionally develop students' understanding and abilities based on contemporary issues

---

"A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshman Learning Community Program"

Two key findings:
❖ Student cohorts matter in terms of persistence

❖ The quality of learning communities varies depending on what happens in the classroom

~Sue Scrivener, MDRC, 2008

Three essential elements

❖ Learning communities as an intervention strategy
❖ Student cohorts
❖ Quality of learning

Elements of Interdisciplinary Work

Purpose:
the question or problem or issue at hand requires access to more than one discipline or field

Disciplinary grounding:
the work shows evidence of grounding in one or more disciplines or fields or areas of expertise

Interdisciplinary leveraging:
two or more disciplines or fields are integrated in a way that surpasses the reach of just one

Thoughtfulness:
an overall quality of thoughtfulness

From: Veronica Boix Mansilla, "Assessing Student Learning at Disciplinary Crossroads," *Change, 2004*

Dimensions of Disciplinary Understanding

Knowledge
- focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Methods
- practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards of performance

Purposes
- anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Forms of communication
- demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

From: Veronica Boix Mansilla, "Assessing Student Learning at Disciplinary Crossroads," *Change, 2004*

What do biologists...

Knowledge   ➔   **know**
- What do biologists know? What are the "big ideas" in the discipline?

Methods   ➔   **do**
- How do biologists do their work? What range of methods do they use?

Purposes   ➔   **why**
- Why do biologists do what they do?

Forms of communication—how do they share it?
- How do biologists share/present/demonstrate their expertise?

What do expert academic readers and writers...

Know...
- What do we know as readers and writers?

Do...
- What do we do as readers and writers?

For what purposes...
- Why do we read and write in academia?

How do we share our work?
- What forms do our reading and writing take?

In our courses, what do we ask students to...

Know...
- are we introducing students to the ideas that are central for us in our work in this field?

Do...
- are we asking students—even beginning students—to do what we do as experts, scaled at an appropriate level?

For what purposes...
- are we creating possibilities for students' work to be purposeful in the ways that our own work is purposeful?

In what forms?
- are we introducing students to a similar range of forms?

Designing Purposeful & Integrative Learning

What is the public issue?

What curricular, co-curricular, & community resources will you use?

Disciplinary Grounding
What do you most want students to learn from your discipline?

Disciplinary Bottlenecks
Underlying conceptions; abilities as readers, writers, quantitative thinkers; approaches to learning

---

Disciplinary bottlenecks ...or tripping points for students

- ❖ Understanding of underlying conceptions and key ideas
- ❖ What they know how to do as readers, writers, quantitative reasoners
- ❖ What they know how to do as able thinkers
- ❖ Approaches to learning and studying

  – Middendorf and Pace, "Decoding the Disciplines" *To Improve the Academy,* Fall 2007

Why learning communities are cited as a high impact educational practice

- ❖ Intellectually rigorous, engaging, relevant curriculum
- ❖ High expectations
- ❖ Independent, creative thinking
- ❖ Collaborative construction of knowledge
- ❖ Public presentation of work

HBCUs and learning communities

- ❖ Phyllis Worthy Dawkins, "Learning Communities Growing in Historically Black Colleges and Universities"
- ❖ Johnson C. Smith University Curriculum Planning Retreat
- ❖ National Summer Institute on Learning Communities, The Evergreen State College (partnership between HBCU Faculty Development Network & Washington Center)

National Learning Communities Directory

- ❖ Register your learning community initiative

  www.evergreen.edu/washcenter