

Learning Communities Growing in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Phyllis Worthy Dawkins
Johnson C. Smith University

Since the 1980s, faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)¹ have been engaged in a number of faculty development activities. During a ten-year grant program, sponsored by the Bush Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, developing learning communities to strengthen student learning and increase retention was one of many project activities undertaken by some of the twenty-three participating black colleges.

HBCU Faculty Development Network

The HBCU Faculty Development Network represents the 105 HBCUs that are committed to promoting effective teaching and student learning through a variety of collaborative activities focusing on faculty enhancement. The Network sponsors the Annual HBCU Faculty Development Symposium and annual summer institutes. In July 2002, the HBCU Faculty Development Network organized its first summer institute on learning communities at Johnson C. Smith University. Campus teams from Johnson C. Smith University, Central State University, North Carolina A&T State University, Benedict College, and Florida Memorial participated in the institute.

As a result of participating in the summer institute, Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, implemented a learning community program in physiology classes and other programs on campus. The students in the program have been engaged in study research groups and faculty are using some of the pedagogical strategies learned at the institute. Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio, is using a cluster model at the freshman level and for their business and

education majors. Florida Memorial College in Miami has established a pilot group to kick off their program of freshman learning communities. North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro offers a variety of learning community programs, including Residential Learning Communities in collaboration with Career Explorations, and Undeclared Majors Freshman Pilot Learning Communities sponsored by The Center for Student Success (TCSS). In fall 2004, TCSS introduced the ASPIRE learning community to thirty at-risk, incoming undeclared freshmen while thirty at-risk, first-year undeclared students participated in a comparison group. The ASPIRE learning community model is a paired course (the same cohort of students enrolled in the same two courses and faculty work across disciplines to integrate curricular and co-curricular learning). Director of TCSS Rita Lamb stated, "Our team is enthusiastic about the positive impact learning communities are having in facilitating students' success and connection to the university community." North Carolina State A&T is also developing learning communities for engineering and technology programs.

Tougaloo College is in its fourth year of learning communities operation, averaging four learning communities a semester. Pairs of faculty from diverse disciplines coordinate their class assignments and promote small group research and presentations with mixed groups of students at the freshman level (from the two linked classes) and in the major. The learning communities also involve co-curricular activities including field trips, social gatherings, and group meals.

Johnson C. Smith University of Charlotte, North Carolina, began offering learning communities with a

Bush-Hewlett Grant in 1998. Since then, we have developed linked courses at the freshman level and in the majors, including links between communication arts and history; African and African American studies; management and accounting; health and physical education methods; Spanish and economics; criminal justice and sociology. We also have clustered learning communities in freshman studies, elementary education, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and in our Honors College. We institutionalized our Freshman Studies learning communities with our Title III grant and in fall 2005, all first-year students at JCSU were enrolled in blocked courses with integrated assignments.

National Learning Communities Summer Institutes at Evergreen

To date, three HBCUs—Johnson C. Smith University, Tougaloo College, and Bethune-Cookman College—participated in the National Summer Institutes on Learning Communities at Evergreen. Bethune-Cookman College established its first learning community in 1995, building upon the successful REV (Renewing Ethical Values) freshman seminars that had been developed by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. This learning community, known as *Jump Start*, focused on linking developmental courses in English and reading with required courses in African American history and a freshman seminar, and proved to be both successful and popular with students and faculty. Students who met departmental standards were able to “jump start” their college careers.

Future Projects

Bennett College is moving forward with its learning communities. A summer institute for faculty, led by Helen Gillotte-Tropp from San Francisco State University and John O’Connor from George Mason University, and a fall faculty development workshop, led by Joni Petschauer of Appalachian State University, helped faculty see how to create a transition for first-year students entering college and the related need for pedagogical reform. As a result of the emphasis on faculty development, student retention, and an increase in students’ GPAs at Bennett,

six paired, thematically-linked courses were launched in the spring of 2005. Each learning community includes collaborative activities and a service-learning project.

Under a three-year FIPSE grant, Howard University, Jackson State University, Xavier University of Louisiana and Talladega College are exploring learning communities in STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) along with faculty learning communities to look at strategies for improving teaching and learning. The project objectives are to improve African American academic achievement and participation in STEM fields, and also, through faculty learning communities, to connect these HBCUs to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning movement.

Of the 105 HBCUs, fourteen institutions (13 percent) are growing or refining their learning communities: Benedict College, Bennett College, Bethune-Cookman College, Central State University, Florida Memorial College, Hampton University, Howard University, Jackson State University, Johnson C. Smith University, North Carolina A&T State University, St. Augustine’s College, Talladega College, Tougaloo College, and Xavier University, and eight institutions are exploring or are in the early stages of implementing learning communities: Barber Scotia College, Claflin College, Fayetteville State University, Miles College, Morris College, Tennessee State University, and Tuskegee University of the District of Columbia. In the next five years, it is conceivable that at least 30 percent of the HBCUs will implement learning communities on their campuses. ♦

Notes

1. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as “any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans.” HBCUs offer all students, regardless of race, an opportunity to develop their skills and talents. These institutions train young people who go on to serve domestically and internationally in the professions as entrepreneurs and in the public and private sectors. The majority of HBCUs are located in the Southeastern states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands. They include forty public four-year, eleven public two-year, forty-nine private four-year, and five private two-year institutions.