

**LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: BEST PRACTICES****Sheila Otto***Middle Tennessee State University  
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Student learning communities are often cited as a high impact practice in efforts to improve student success in higher education. In this article, we review research about the effectiveness of learning communities, describe learning community models at various types of post-secondary institutions, recommend best practices for the development and implementation of successful learning communities, and cite a specific example of a very successful learning community at Middle Tennessee State University to illustrate how best practices can be implemented.

**Keywords:** learning communities, higher education retention, student success, best practices

**Introduction**

Although Americans have exceptional access to higher education, the United States is falling behind other countries in the percentage of young adults, ages 25-34, with a college degree. Only 44 percent of this American demographic have earned a diploma, ranking twelfth among the world's leading economies (Will, 2014), and prompting many schools to focus more attention on issues related to retention and student success (Tinto, 2006; Tinto, 2012). A number of interventions have been linked to improvements in

retention and graduation, one of which is the implementation of carefully planned, high quality learning communities.

The history of learning communities is usually traced to the University of Wisconsin's Experimental College, a two-year living-learning community founded by Alexander Meiklejohn in the 1920s. Premised on an integrated and interdisciplinary great books curriculum, the Experimental College also promoted active learning and community building (Meiklejohn, 1932). Meiklejohn's work inspired Joseph Tussman's implementation of an Experimental College at the University of California at Berkeley in the mid-1960s (Trow, 1998) and later the establishment of the Evergreen State College in Washington state in 1970 (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). All of these precursors to modern learning community models emphasized an interdisciplinary curriculum, a strong sense of community, and collaboration among students and faculty.

The term "learning community" is now ubiquitous in American higher education. Smith et al. (2004) define learning community as a "variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students" (p. 20). Although some learning communities do not require students to enroll in a set of common courses, this broad definition describes most learning communities in the U.S. today

Researchers in higher education have cited learning communities as having a positive effect on student success. For example, Kuh (2008) labels learning communities as one of ten high impact practices. In a study of learning communities at 365 four-year post-secondary institutions, Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that student participation in learning communities had a profound effect on those indicators often associated with student success and retention. In particular, students participating in learning communities showed "enhanced academic performance, integration of academic and social experiences, gains in multiple areas of skill, competence, and knowledge, and overall satisfaction with the college experience" (pp. 130-31). Although the positive effects were more pronounced for freshmen, they continued into the senior year, even if learning community participation was early in the students' college experience.

Learning communities have also been found to be effective for students who are most at risk of not graduating (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Engstrom and Tinto, 2008). In a study of learning community participation at 13 higher education institutions, Engstrom and Tinto (2008) found positive effects among academically underprepared, predominantly low-income students at both two-year and four-year schools. When compared to similar peers, learning community students were significantly more engaged in a number of areas, including course work and interactions outside of class with faculty and fellow students. The learning community students also felt they received more encouragement and support from their institution, faculty, and fellow students. Engstrom and Tinto note it is not surprising that “the average difference in persistence between learning-community and comparison-group students in the four-year institutions was nearly 10 percent, and in the two-year colleges it was slightly more than 5 percent (although on some campuses it was as high as 15 percent)” (p. 47).

In summary, extensive research supports the notion that learning communities are associated with improvements on a variety of student outcome measures, including retention, grades, and engagement. The positive impact of learning communities depends, in part, on the specific learning community model used. In the next section, we describe some of the more common models in higher education.

### **Learning Community Models in Higher Education**

A number of different learning community models have been implemented in American colleges and universities. When designing learning communities, higher education institutions must consider their specific needs, goals, and resources (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Learning communities are often catalysts for reforming and improving post-secondary institutions, and they are most successful and sustainable when they are clearly and directly matched with an institutional need (Smith et al., 2004). In this section, we describe examples of learning communities that have been implemented successfully in both four-year and community colleges.

#### **Learning Communities at Four-Year Schools**

Georgia State University first implemented a learning community program in 1999. Almost all freshmen enroll in five or six common courses as cohorts of 25 students.

According to the university's web site, Georgia State's Freshman Learning Communities (FLCs) "link clusters of courses, usually five or six, from the Core Curriculum with GSU 1010, an orientation course that provides students with essential information about the academic demands of the university, its rules, resources, and academic, social, and personal 'survival skills' that contribute to academic success" (Georgia State University, 2015, para. 6). While they are not specific to academic major, FLCs at Georgia State are built around general areas of interest (Business, Education, Health Sciences, Humanities, Policy Studies, Social Sciences, or Undeclared). Student benefits from learning community participation extend past the freshman year at Georgia State; learning community students have higher grade point averages, retain scholarships at higher rates, and graduate in less time than their peers (Georgia State University, 2015).

Colorado State University's Key Communities are living-learning communities that admit all students but specifically target those students who are considered to be most at risk. All Key Community students live together in a popular and centrally located dormitory. Before classes begin, Key Community students participate in an intensive two-day program orientation. In addition to the residential experience, Key Community participants enroll in three common courses—two core courses and a Key seminar. For example, small cohorts of students have seats reserved in core psychology and biology courses and then enroll also in an interdisciplinary Psychobiology Key seminar, where they explore connections between the two disciplines, build relationships with other students and faculty, participate in active learning experiences, and intentionally work on improving critical thinking skills. Key Communities have been found to positively impact the success rates of all participating students, including first to second year retention and graduation rates, but are especially effective for those most at risk—including students who are first generation, low income, academically underprepared, and/or underrepresented minorities (Nosaka & Novak, 2014).

Another example of a learning community at a four-year school is Texas A&M Corpus Christi's First-Year Learning Communities Program. Groups of 25 students enroll in three (Triad) or four (Tetrad) common courses. These Triads and Tetrads are centered around a small writing class and a small first-year seminar class, which are linked to one or

two large lecture classes. Instructors of the first-year seminar classes attend the large lecture classes with their students and help them to develop critical thinking and study skills, to see the connections among their courses, and to clarify their academic and career goals. Instructors in each learning community work together to connect course curricula, assignments, and activities. In 2002 and 2003, the school's first-year program was recognized for excellence by Brevard College Policy Center on the First Year of College (Texas A&M University Corpus Christi, 2015).

At Syracuse University, some learning community options require students to enroll in a set of common courses, but others do not; instead, students are housed together in groups that have the same interests. Students in the Arts Adventure Learning Community, for example, live in the same dormitory and participate in a variety of co- and extra-curricular activities, including attendance at performances and visits to galleries. The students also collaborate on various artistic projects. The Maxwell Citizenship Learning Community at Syracuse is also a living-learning community that is open to first-year students who are interested in acquiring skills in leadership and citizenship. Students are not required to enroll in common courses, but they must participate in the Maxwell Citizenship Conference, and they perform approximately 20 hours of community service as a group each semester. The learning community program at Syracuse is consistently cited by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the top learning community programs in the United States (Syracuse University, 2015).

### **Learning Communities at Community Colleges**

A number of community colleges have also implemented successful learning community models. Kingsborough Community College, a member of the City University of New York system, has a long history of offering both freshman and advanced learning communities. In the school's Opening Doors Learning Communities, cohorts of approximately 25 entering students enroll in three courses—English (either freshman English or a developmental course), a General Education course in the disciplines (e.g., art history, biology, psychology), and Freshman Seminar. In addition, advanced learning communities, which are geared to students beyond their first semester, are called Integrative Studies Learning Communities. These learning communities are targeted to

specific majors and vary in the number of courses that are linked; many of these learning communities require an Integrative Seminar, a two-hour, one-credit course that sometimes has a particular career focus and that always helps students integrate information from their other courses. Studies have shown the significant positive impact in the short term on student outcomes among learning community students at Kingsborough, including significant increases in the number of semesters of continuous enrollment and the number of credits earned, as well as a nearly 5% increase in graduation rates for program students compared to control students (Bloom & Sommo, 2005; Sommo, Mayer, Rudd, & Cullinan, 2012).

At LaGuardia Community College, learning community students enroll in two or more common courses, which are linked by common themes and may be related to the students' major. Examples include learning communities focused on themes such as global politics, the supernatural, and gender and identity. Other learning communities are geared toward a student's major or area of interest, such as business and technology, allied health, and liberal arts. Students who speak English as a second language may enroll in learning communities where they take a set of common courses while also improving their English language skills. In response to the question "Why should you take a learning community?" the LaGuardia Community College web site states, "Students who take learning communities are more likely to do well in all their courses; they work together and support each other; the assignments from the different courses are related to each other and the faculty members work closely with all the students" (LaGuardia Community College, 2015, para. 1).

At the Community College of Baltimore County, learning community students enroll in two or more common courses. Choices include learning communities for students who speak English as a second language, students who are required to enroll in developmental courses, and honors students. Other learning communities include courses that are linked by themes, problems, or historical periods. According to the college's web site, all learning communities are characterized by explicit interdisciplinary connections and by the formation of strong bonds between students and faculty (Community College of Baltimore County, 2015).

In summary, learning community models at four-year schools usually include small to large numbers of linked courses, may incorporate a residential component, and often target specific subgroups of students. At community colleges, the emphasis in learning communities is frequently on major/career choice, curricular integration, and support for at-risk populations of students. Regardless of institution type, however, successful learning communities are usually defined by adherence to commonly accepted best practices. In the next section, we discuss core practices and provide an example of a learning community that incorporates those practices.

### **Learning Community Core Practices**

What can we learn from successful learning community programs like those described in the previous section? As noted earlier, these learning communities are premised on a clear understanding of an institution—its faculty, students, culture, and resources. At Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), a comprehensive public university of 23,000 students, different types of learning community structures have been adopted over the years. A recent experiment offering “block” learning communities of four or five common courses met with very little success. Although lack of faculty collaboration and limited curricular integration were problems, MTSU’s incoming freshmen, to whom these learning communities were marketed, also balked at the idea, often citing that it seemed “too much like high school.” In addition, many students were unable to accommodate the block courses because of their busy schedules, which often involved paid employment, family obligations, and transportation issues. Because enrollment in the blocks was voluntary, most students made other choices, resulting in learning communities that were under-enrolled and did not remain true cohorts.

MTSU has had much more success pairing two courses taught by faculty who are committed to working closely together. In addition to addressing the practical and logistical concerns associated with learning communities, it is the faculty’s approach that is key to the success of learning communities (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). One learning community that has been offered with success for a number of years at MTSU links two General Education courses: General Psychology and U.S. History Survey II. The professors who developed this learning community have taught these courses as a learning

community pair for five years, although each year they work together to better integrate their course materials, add fresh elements, and address course logistics. Initially these two courses seemed entirely different, with few potential points of overlap, but the instructors now focus heavily on social psychology and social history while still covering all other aspects of psychology and U.S. history that are required for these General Education courses. In the General Psychology learning community class, students explore their own attitudes and biases and examine the foundations of stereotyping and prejudice. In U.S. History Survey II, students study immigration, nativism, racism, civil rights, and movements for social justice through the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From its inception, the course pair has had the same strong, shared theme that ties the classes together—the making of civil society and the students’ responsibilities in it. The faculty currently title their learning community “Attitudes, Ethnicity, and Being American: The Psychology and History of Cultural Pluralism,” but the overarching theme has changed through the years. What has remained constant is the shared emphasis on civic learning and democratic engagement—that is, students’ real lives in a shared society and how they themselves can make their communities stronger. Civic learning contextualizes both historic and psychological content by making it very personal for students. Students learn about historic hatreds in a society built on establishing justice and then, through psychological self-assessment instruments, discover what biases (precursors to stereotypes and prejudice) they personally hold, realizations that perhaps had been unacknowledged and perhaps unconscious, as well as the origins of those biases.

Thus, this MTSU General Education learning community examines attitudes, prejudices, and injustices that Americans have worked, and continue to work, to overcome in order to realize our national purpose of liberty, justice, and equality for all. By asking students what their responsibilities are as citizens, this learning community intentionally broadens students’ understandings and thinking about the diverse society in which they live; it also creatively integrates course content, requirements, assignments, and activities across two very different disciplines. Both classes are experiential in format, inside and outside of the classroom, requiring active learning and hands-on projects by both professors. Additionally, students are required to engage in joint reflective exercises in



which they tie or link their past and present experiences to historical and psychological course content.

Although learning community structures can vary greatly, depending on institution type, student demographics, and specific campus goals, there are methods that have emerged as “best practices” in multiple learning community models. In *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education*, Smith et al. (2004) identify five core practices that can guide the formation and execution of learning communities of various structures. These core practices, all of which can be seen to some extent in successful learning community models, are community, diversity, integration, active learning, and reflection and assessment. As we describe each of these core practices in the following sections, we provide illustrations drawn from the MTSU psychology-history learning community.

### **Community**

According to Smith et al. (2004), “In learning communities identified as successful, *learning* and *community* have been highly interrelated” (p. 98). A feeling of belonging can play a pivotal role in whether students choose to stay in college or leave. A successful learning community provides opportunities for interactions among students and also between learning community instructors and their students.

To accomplish the core practice of building an inclusive community, learning communities must create safe spaces for all students to interact more closely with teachers and with fellow students. Teaching teams can strengthen community by offering activities that foster hospitality, inclusion, and validation for all members. In-class and out-of-class activities might include extended introductions of both students and teachers, explicit recognition of all the disciplines and co-curricular elements of the learning community, opportunities for dialogue and collaborative work, informal social occasions and excursions, the creation of study groups, and service learning projects. (Smith et al., 2004, pp. 99-100)

Although all community building activities can be of value, it is quite literally “learning in community” that can make the most difference in the success of students.

In the history-psychology learning community at MTSU, building community is a natural byproduct. Structurally, the professors work through campus scheduling to teach their two classes in back-to-back time slots in the same classroom. Students are not “locked in”—they move around during the break between class times—but the timing and geography allow them natural overlaps to visit and interact between classes with one another and the instructors. Students must negotiate jointly through the semester’s assignments in two shared classes; they work together on projects in and out of class; they study for two classes in study groups under a single peer mentor; and they get to know each other’s ideas through selected work posted on the classroom digital bulletin boards. There is intimacy in a small class pair (20 students in this case), and there are many formal and informal opportunities for community building.

The single biggest success for genuine student bonding and community building that the professors have developed involves taking students to dinner on Friday nights during the first weeks of the semester. These evening outings have been coined “Out and Abouts”; students and their professors go to different ethnic restaurants each week where there are dinner guests of different ethnicities. These outings are scheduled for the first part of the semester because students have fewer papers and tests during this time, and they are still new to the campus and have fewer obligations. This seems to be an especially important time for getting students integrated into the campus community by helping them get to know others.

The primary objective of the Out and About dinners is, of course, to learn about present-day immigration and to meet and talk with people living in immigrant and refugee communities in the area—to break down cross-cultural barriers using the learning opportunity of personal conversation across a shared dinner table— but what really happens is that the students quickly break down social barriers with each other. They carpool with one another, negotiate the new geography off campus, argue over radio stations, and are equally inept at scooping up a bite of *wat* with a piece of *injera*. Community building is the sweet byproduct of wonderful learning experiences.

Additionally, and also importantly, the students get to know their professors outside of the classroom in informal settings. They may meet their professors’ spouses and

children at dinner; they sit knee-to-knee together, cross-legged on carpets at the Kurdish restaurant; they sample bites of unknown foods from each other's plates at the Ethiopian and Indian restaurants; and they have their faculty members' cell phone numbers for when they get lost in traffic. The end result is that brand new college students begin to feel known and safe in this small learning community within the larger forbidding universe of an enormous, seemingly impersonal and unfamiliar public university.

Without exception, in their final reflection activity and assessment of the semester's work together, students say the Out and About dinners were the best experience. These faculty members know their students learn and internalize a great deal of the semester's material from the learning community together, but in the Maya Angelou sense of people never forgetting how you made them feel, the dinners off campus together make the students feel known and valued at MTSU. The positive outcomes have benefits at every level.

### **Diversity**

When defining diversity as a core practice in learning communities, the focus is not only on the importance of including diverse student populations, but also on the necessity of inclusive curricula and pedagogies. Learning communities can be instrumental in improving the success of diverse and underrepresented student populations, as illustrated in the Key Communities at Colorado State University (Nosaka & Novak, 2014). Other learning communities focus on the intentional inclusion of diverse perspectives in curricula. Diversity in learning communities can also be achieved through the use of inclusive pedagogies, including collaborative learning, experiential learning, and safe spaces for dialogue (Smith et al., 2004).

The MTSU history-psychology learning community uses ethnic and cultural diversity, religious pluralism, and a shared, valued, common society as its central theme. Understanding diversity is the very heart of its civic objectives. To approach the learning needed to viscerally understand these core principles in American society, the learning community has integrated a diverse array of pedagogies.

Creating a "Raider Learning Community," the MTSU combined-course, interdisciplinary-studies structure offered through the university, was the first step. This

was followed by faculty members' application to have each course in the pair included in the university's Experiential Learning (EXL) Program. All EXL courses must have at least one nontraditional, or outside-of-the-classroom, learning experience for students during the course of a semester. In the MTSU history-psychology course pairing, there are multiple experiential learning opportunities.

In this learning community, students attend Out and Abouts at different ethnic restaurants together, and they take field trips to historic sites or religious centers, as the occasion arises. Students are encouraged to register to vote, and the class travels together to the polls. In history class, students learn about oral history and complete oral history interviews with family members, immigrant Americans, and older individuals who may have participated in civil rights or social-reform actions. In the psychology course, students identify groups for whom they may hold biases or stereotypes and complete service work or a project with one or more individuals from that group to reduce their biases through contact. In history class, students engage in a role-playing historic game about social movements in which students study and act out historic characters, as part of the national Reacting to the Past initiative. And every year, students in this learning community participate directly in national Constitution Day, by reading the Constitution aloud to the campus over PA systems. Other activities have involved observing courtroom cases, attending new-citizen naturalization ceremonies, and participating in the many other Constitution Day events that take place on campus or in the community. The students in the class are from diverse backgrounds, the course materials focus on "Out of Many, One," and combining diverse pedagogies helps bring the ideas alive.

### **Integration**

Although curricular integration can be extremely difficult to achieve (Visher, Schneider, Wathington, & Collado, 2010), learning communities that have little or no curricular integration, where students simply co-register for the same group of courses, are not taking full advantage of this high impact practice. Meaningful integration can be accomplished through interdisciplinarity, connections to co-curricular activities, deep learning, and even integrative pedagogies such as collaborative learning and service learning (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008; Smith et al., 2004). Some learning communities

accomplish the goal of integration by having students enroll in two courses in the disciplines and then in an integrative seminar, where they can focus explicitly on interdisciplinary connections (Nosaka & Novak, 2014). In most situations, however, learning community faculty are responsible for doing the important work of integrating the curricula for their courses.

In the MTSU history-psychology learning community, the two courses are as deeply integrated as the two separate disciplines' requirements allow. There is a common theme and shared learning objectives. There is a common physical classroom and a two-hour, back-to-back time block. There are shared field trips and shared events on and off campus. There are reflective writing assignments throughout the semester that integrate the content of both courses. Finally, a shared peer mentor (a student who previously completed the course pair) advises students in both subjects, and the faculty are regularly and commonly in each other's classes for discussing material, integrating ideas, and talking informally with students.

These two classes still have separate syllabi (although there is another learning community at MTSU with a single syllabus), but the faculty have sequenced the course materials to complement and support each other's concepts. All dates are well integrated—exams and projects are never on the same days. Because the classes are back to back, any exam being held on a specific day always occurs first: If the history course normally meets first but an exam is scheduled in the psychology course, the psychology course will meet first so that students do not skip their first class (history) or worry about their psychology test through the first class period. Similarly, when writing assignments are due for either class, the papers are always collected by the first professor at the beginning of the first hour for the same reason—to discourage absences and tardiness, so that both professors get full attendance and students' full attention.

Because of the integrated structure, an added benefit is that when one professor has dense material that needs a larger block of time, one class can have a double class period, or when one of the professors needs to be out of town for a conference, the other professor takes the double block. Not only do the back-to-back time slots offer the flexibility for

uninterrupted blocks of time for activities and field trips, they also help faculty organize class time productively.

### **Active Learning**

Active learning is a broad concept that encompasses many of the other learning community core practices (Smith et al., 2004). Active learning can include a number of different approaches, including problem-based learning, collaborative projects, service learning, civic learning, and undergraduate research. Although active learning pedagogies have become increasingly recognized in higher education as essential practices, it is especially important that active learning be incorporated into learning communities. Active learning can support the development of community and can provide opportunities for interdisciplinary connections for both students and teachers.

For the history-psychology learning community at MTSU, active learning or experiential learning has been embedded to aid in accomplishing its course objectives. As referenced earlier in the Diversity section, active learning is essential to the civic engagement purposes of this learning community. From oral histories and service learning projects, to field trips and Out and About dinners in immigrant neighborhoods, to trips to the elections polls and working on-campus voter-registration tables, to labor rallies and suffrage marches around campus (as part of Reacting to the Past), to reenacting the 1913 Woman Suffrage Parade in Washington, D.C., and to reading the Constitution aloud to the entire campus community on Constitution Day, students who are part of the history-psychology learning community are actively engaged in their learning.

### **Reflection and Assessment**

Reflection and assessment should not be seen as practices that happen only at the end of a process, but as ongoing and integral to the learning community experience (Smith et al., 2004). Reflection, a staple of successful learning communities, gives students opportunities to consider their previous knowledge, skills, and assumptions in light of the work they are doing in their learning community classes.

To translate active learning into something that is meaningful and lasting, students need to learn . . . to reflect in action about the learning process itself. They must build their habits of monitoring their prior knowledge and their learning,

consciously connecting new learning to what they already know, noticing what is confusing, or inventing a new strategy if the one they are using does not seem to work. This involves critical, creative, applied thinking about the academic content at hand. Equally important, reflective thinking should be metacognitive. (Smith et al., 2004, p. 125)

Reflection can also be a community experience for teachers and students, especially in learning communities that emphasize team projects, peer feedback, and study groups.

Reflection has been an inherent part of the MTSU history-psychology learning community because it is a requirement of the MTSU EXL program. This learning community has incorporated analytical, interdisciplinary student reflective writing in its curriculum since the beginning, and in true learning community fashion, faculty members compose the joint reflective writing prompts together. Through the years, the amount of reflective writing has evolved, but at present, there are seven shared reflection assignments—one every two weeks—throughout the semester. Questions and prompts integrate the two disciplines, and students' analyses must integrate both content areas. Faculty members take turns reading students' reflections so that both of them share in commenting on and evaluating students' written work. Through reflective writing assignments, the students triangulate from (1) specific classroom content in both history and psychology to (2) how these ideas directly impacted American society in the past and how they continue to impact communities in the present day, bringing in current news and campus life, and then to (3) themselves personally, their families, their upbringing, their values, their own analyses and points of view, how they developed their attitudes and behaviors, and how what they are learning is developing their thinking.

Because they are interdisciplinary, learning communities also offer rich sites for assessment. Some learning communities, especially those that pair two courses, have a common syllabus, and all graded assignments are shared, but this level of integration is not typical. In many learning communities, however, instructors have a subset of common learning outcomes and assign projects to assess those outcomes.

Assessment of student development in the MTSU history-psychology learning community has thus far been both qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative instruments

have been specifically selected to evaluate whether the civic learning and civic responsibility objectives of both courses are being met. One survey utilized by the MTSU EXL Program measures student development for citizenship at the end of the semester; in this learning community, however, faculty administer both a before and after version of this questionnaire, which asks if students have made progress in appreciating differences, understanding the needs of others, recognizing the abilities of others, and interacting with people of different backgrounds.

Similarly, these faculty members have adopted the Civic Engagement Quiz from the Tufts University Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). This survey is also given at the beginning and end of the semester for the purpose of capturing student change in community involvement and voting behavior, as well as indicators of public and political voice.

Qualitative assessment has been captured through the students' reflective writing assignments and papers, such as the service learning project paper in the psychology course. The final reflective assignment explicitly asks students to evaluate their growth as citizens, their relationships with people different from the types of friends with whom they grew up, and their maturation academically. These areas of questioning are broken down into finer categories of self-assessment for the students to address. For the course instructors, this written feedback is invaluable. Students write in heartfelt words about how much they have learned. Their self-reflective end-of-semester comments result in the professors continuing to teach the learning community year after year. The students' final reflection is a window into their growth as thinkers, learners, human beings, and members of society.

### **Conclusion**

Learning communities have become an established feature in American higher education. When these learning communities are carefully planned and implemented, they can have a dramatic and positive effect on students. Unlike some educational trends that appear promising but lack resiliency, learning communities have proven to be effective across a variety of types of institutions and in a variety of different forms. As Matthews, Smith, & MacGregor (2012) have noted:



Many educational innovations, even promising ones, never fully scale up to reach their full potential on a single campus or become a widespread feature of many campuses; the good news is that learning communities have done both. Learning community approaches continue to evolve and expand in their scope and potential for addressing significant educational challenges. (99-100)

Successful learning communities, however, must be carefully planned and implemented. Without curricular integration, a learning community does not take full advantage of the potential benefits for students. Co-registering for a group of unrelated courses might provide some meager advantages to a cohort of students, but the rich experiences of a fully integrated learning community require time and effort. As the MTSU history-psychology learning community example illustrates, effective learning communities require a commitment from faculty, staff, and administrators.

A successful learning community program requires management and supervision, preferably either a full-time or part-time director; coordination with campus personnel responsible for scheduling classes and classroom space; a process for recruiting faculty; funding for faculty teams, to compensate them for working together to integrate their courses; professional development for faculty, to help them develop communities that reflect best practices; coordination with campus advisors; and a process for marketing the learning communities to students. If all of these elements are in place, the chances are good that a successful learning community can be developed and maintained and that the positive effects of such a community on student learning and success will accrue.

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