

Learning Communities: Building Gateways to Student Success¹

Vincent Tinto
Syracuse University

Good morning. It is a honor to have been asked to speak to you not only because of the very important theme to which this conference is directed, but also because I have come to appreciate the fact that you know more about how to promote student success and are more focused on that goal than most other people on our campuses. Imagine what our colleges and universities might be if everyone were as focused on that goal as you are, if higher education was as committed to student success as you are.

The theme of this conference “Gateway to Learning: Promoting Student Success “ draws its inspiration from the city of St. Louis, the gateway city to the American frontier, and the pioneering spirit of countless Americans and immigrants who passed through this gateway to settle the West. In their spirit, I would like to take a few minutes this morning to share with you stories of the pioneering efforts of a growing number of colleges who have sought to construct their own gateways on campus. Specifically, I would like to tell you about the way increasing numbers of colleges, two and four-year, public and private, have utilized learning communities to promote student success, especially, but not only, among first-year students. I do so with the hope that the stories of their successes, and the lessons we learn from them, might provide you with additional ways of thinking about your own efforts to promote student success on your campus.

Let me begin by first reviewing what we mean by the term learning communities. In their most basic form learning communities are a kind of co- registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together. The same students register for two or more courses, forming a sort of study team. In some cases, typically referred to as “linked courses,” students will enroll together in two courses, most typically a course in writing or math with a content course such as history or sociology or, in the case of math, a course in science or engineering. In larger universities, such as the University of Oregon and the University of Washington, beginning students may attend two or more

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lecture classes with 200-300 other students but stay together for a smaller discussion section or what is commonly referred to as a Freshman Interest Group. In other cases, such as the Federated Learning Communities at LaGuardia Community College, students take three or more courses together in which they are the only members of the class. In this way, they form a “community of learners” whose members are all studying the same material. In still other cases, such as Seattle Central Community College, students in their Coordinated Studies Program take all their courses together in one block of time so that the community meets two or three times a week for four to six hours at a time.

Typically, learning communities are organized around a central theme which links the courses -- say, “Body and Mind” in which required courses in human biology, psychology, and sociology are linked in pursuit of a singular piece of knowledge: how and why humans behave as they do. The point of doing so is to ensure that the sharing of a curriculum provides students with a coherent interdisciplinary experience that promotes a deeper type of learning than is possible in stand alone, unrelated, courses.

The themes that organize the learning community can vary, as do the audiences to whom the learning community is directed. At New York’s LaGuardia Community College, learning communities are designed for students studying for a career in business. At Cerritos College in California, they include students in science and engineering. In other institutions, such as Iowa State University, learning communities serve the needs of new students. In those cases, learning communities frequently link the shared courses to a freshman seminar. In other cases, as in California State University-Long Beach, they are being adapted to the needs of “remedial” students. And in still other cases, such as the University of Vermont and the University of Michigan, they are part of a residential life program for new students. My point is simple. Learning communities provide a structure for student learning that can be applied to any content and adapted to any audience.

To be effective, learning communities require that faculty, and in some cases, faculty and student affairs professionals, collaborate in a variety of ways. Faculty in linked courses typically plan their assignments so that the activities of one complement that of the other. In some cases, such as the Coordinated Studies programs at Seattle Central Community College and the Federated Learning Communities of LaGuardia Community College, faculty will collaborate in the very construction of courses, their common themes and content. The same applies, for instance, to learning communities for students needing academic assistance or those involving residential life. In these, and other cases, faculty and student affairs staff, typically learning center and residential life staff will work together as a team. The point of such collaboration is to ensure that the sharing of courses provides for a coherent educational experience, one that is intentional structured to promote student education.

Clearly there is no one type of learning community, there are many. But nearly all have two things in common. One is *shared knowledge*. By organizing the shared courses around a theme or single large subject, learning communities seek to construct a coherent educational experience that is not just an unconnected array of courses, say in composition, calculus, modern history, and geology. In this way, students come to share, as a community of learners, a body of knowledge that is itself connected. The other is *shared knowing*. By enrolling in several classes together, students not only share a body of knowledge, they also share the experience of trying to know or learn the material of the shared courses. Indeed, some faculty members actively promote shared knowing by employing collaborative or cooperative pedagogies within and between the linked courses. These pedagogies, as you no doubt know, require students to take an active role in the construction of knowledge and do so in ways that require them to learn together as connected learners. Typically students are asked to work together in groups so that the work of the group cannot be accomplished without each and every member of the group doing her or his part.

As part of a federally funded research center, my colleagues, Anne Goodsell-Love, now at the University of Akron and Pat Russo, now at the State University of New York, and I studied a range of learning communities for beginning college students in both two and four-year public institutions. We selected sites that served urban commuter student populations with the belief that if learning communities worked there, they could work anywhere. We employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. We used comparative surveys of program and non-program students in order to ascertain program impacts and qualitative interviews with students and observations of classes and student interactions to better understand how those impacts arose during the course of the school year. What we learned from our research reveals much, I believe, about how we can all reconstruct our programs, especially, but not only, in the first year, to better promote student success on our campuses.

Well what did we learn? First, we discovered that being part of a shared learning experience led students to develop their own supportive peer groups. Formed in class, these groups extended beyond the classroom and often beyond the campus in ways, which many students saw as an important part of their being able to persist in college. As one older student put it “my learning group was like a raft carrying me over the rapids of my life.” For many students, the friendships formed in the learning community continued beyond the program over the academic year to form a web of affiliations that shaped the rest of their educational careers. For some, the friendships were short-lived, simply a part of the program. But even those students spoke highly of their experience and of the value they placed on those friendships and the support, indeed sense of place and belonging, they provided. Listen to the voice of one student as she looks back upon her experience in a learning community:

"In the cluster we knew each other, we were friends, we discussed everything from all the classes. We knew things very, very well because we discussed it all so much. We had a discussion about everything. Now it's more difficult because there are different people in each class. There's not so much - oh, I don't know how to say it. It's not so much togetherness. In the cluster if we needed help or if we had questions, we could help each other. . Now we're just, more on our own."

More than just providing support, the shared learning activities of the learning community and the affiliations, which formed therein, served to more actively involve students in learning. Simply put, students in the learning communities spent more time actively involved in learning activities and more time interacting with students and faculty about educational matters than did similar students in the traditional classrooms of the college. What struck us was the fact that such involvements extended well beyond the classroom so that students spent more time on task, that is in learning activities, even after class. Indeed, when we measured student participation in a variety of educational activities we found that students in learning communities spent more time engaged in learning even after we excluded the time they spent on learning activities within the classroom where one would expect there to be more engagement. Listen to the voice of another student as he describes his learning experience in the program:

"You know, the more I talk to other people about our class stuff, the homework, the tests, the more I'm actually learning... and the more I learn not only about other people but also about the subject because my brain is getting more, because I'm getting more involved with the students. I'm getting more involved with the class even after class."

Note his phrasing "I'm getting more involved with the class even after class." The shared learning activities of the learning community generated involvements in learning which transcended the borders that typically mark student experience. To borrow George Kuh's wonderfully evocative language, the learning community generated a seamless learning environment in which in-class and out-of-class learning was one and the same. The social affiliations students formed in the shared learning environment of the classroom seemed to drive their engagement in learning within and beyond the classroom. Quite simply, they studied more, even after class, because they enjoyed studying together.

In this very important way, the learning community served as a gateway for wider involvements beyond the classroom which further enhanced student learning. It is little wonder then that we found that students in the learning community learned more, indeed enjoyed learning more, and persisted through

and beyond the first year at substantially higher rates than did students in the traditional first year curriculum. In this very important manner, learning communities for first year students served as gateways to subsequent success. They became the vehicle through which successes were constructed over time.

But there is more. Students who participated in learning communities, in particular those that employed collaborative learning pedagogies, spoke of learning in those communities as deeper and richer or as one student put it “better.” Listen to this student as she speaks of her learning experience in the learning community:

“So you’re constantly having to think, re-think, and even re-re-think what’s going on in light of all the feedback you’re getting from all these different points of view and what it does is shape and mold your own point of view to a much finer degree ... we not only learn more, we learn better.”

For some students, especially those who in the past had struggled in school, the collaborative environment of the learning community provided a safe place, a smaller knowable place of belonging, in which they were valued and in which they discovered they could learn. As one student put it “You realize you know something, like you’re not dumb.” Here I think of the work of Laura Rendon at Arizona State University and her emphasis on the role of validation to student success, especially among non-traditional students.

Those of you who have read Marcia Baxter Magolda’s important work will also recognize the parallels between the conditions she identified as critical for learning, namely validation, situated learning, and shared learning, and the conditions for learning established within the learning communities we studied. To us they seem to be one and the same.

What can we learn from these pioneering institutions and the learning communities they have successfully employed to promote student success?

First, we can learn of the importance of collaboration among faculty and student affairs professionals to the success of these and other freshman year programs. Despite the fact that learning communities tend to be faculty run initiatives, you can add much to their success. Given your knowledge of student learning and group facilitation, two areas typically lacking in faculty’s repertoire, you can help faculty design collaborative learning activities and imbue in them the

personalism and mattering which Nancy Schlossberg argues are critical components of effective learning environments.

You can also help faculty become collaborative learners. For many faculty, their experience working in a learning community may be their first occasion to work with another colleague on anything other than a committee. In this regard, you can provide invaluable modeling for faculty as they try to negotiate this new terrain.

It is also the case, as noted earlier, that learning communities provide an academic structure within which your collaboration with faculty is essential. Some learning communities, such as those for new students or students needing academic assistance, require the collaborative efforts of both faculty and student affairs professionals. And they do so in ways in which faculty and student affairs professionals are equal partners in the education of students. In this manner, learning communities serve as gateways for your involvement with others and their involvement with you. As for our students, they can serve as bridges that span the moats that now divide us. The irony of our current situation is that while we are willing to recognize the importance of shared learning among students, we sometimes fail to recognize the need for us to become shared learners as well. It is perhaps telling of the character of higher education that faculty and staff, more so the faculty, are placed in work situations where they are isolated one from another, where their learning is highly individualized and isolated from the learning of their peers. Perhaps it is time, no let me say it is more clearly, it is more than time for us to tear down our castles and moats and reorganize ourselves into learning communities as well.

In this regard, one of the many virtues of the learning community model is that it challenges the traditional roles that we have established for our students and ourselves. The responsibilities and roles of the faculty, student affairs professionals, and students become less distinct, more blurred as each attempts to negotiate meaning with the other. Learning becomes a shared activity and the responsibility of all members of the community. Unfortunately our existing organizational structures have gotten in the way of putting learning at the center of our activities.

The question we should be asking is not how student affairs or faculty can promote student success, but rather how both groups can transcend their functional boundaries to work collaboratively across the campus with each other and with students to create seamless learning environments in which success is possible for all students, not just some.

As a point aside, let me observe that the one area where we are having success in creating norms and activities consistent with the ideals of the learning community model, that is where students, faculty, and student affairs professionals work collaboratively with one another is that of service learning. I direct you to a recent article by my colleague, Catherine Engstrom, and myself in *About Campus* which describes the innovative efforts of a number of campuses, including our own, and what they can teach us about the value of transcending traditional organizational boundaries on behalf of student success.

Transcending those boundaries, however, requires us to pay attention to the skills and values of those who will follow us. Quite simply, we need to model in our own graduate programs the values and behaviors we seek among future members of our community. We must ask ourselves in what ways our graduate programs promote interdisciplinary approaches to solving issues and problems? Do they invite and value diverse perspectives and critical thinking about those perspectives? Do they foster opportunities for faculty, students, and you - student affairs administrators - to become partners in the learning process? Do they provide collaborative learning activities that foster shared knowledge and validate the personal and professional experiences of our students? Do they model the skills students will need to develop inclusive communities of scholar-practitioners on their own future campuses? Do our students leave our programs understanding, as Parker Palmer has argued, that learning is indeed a relational activity that is immeasurably enhanced when all voices are included in that activity.

If we are serious about rebuilding our universities to promote student success, we can start by rebuilding our own programs that train future faculty and student affairs professionals. I point this out because this is precisely what Catherine Engstrom and I are now seeking to do at Syracuse University as we reorganize our program in higher education. And this is precisely what Syracuse University and the School of Education is seeking to achieve in its Future Professoriate program. So if anyone is interested, give us a call. We would like to share what we are learning.

There are, of course, other reasons, perhaps selfish ones, for you to promote learning communities on your campuses. You will find that your own work with students outside the classroom will be greatly facilitated, if not enriched. Students who participate in learning communities acquire important social and academic skills that greatly expand and enrich their out-of-class experiences. Not only are they more likely to become involved in extracurricular activities, but also more willing to collaborate with others in the construction of those activities. And they will bring to those activities skills that you can draw upon to further promote student involvement and collaboration on campus. In this way, learning communities serve not only as gateways to student success, but also as gateways to greater student involvement with you and with other people on campus.

The impact such involvements can have on campus climates is not inconsequential. Among other things, carefully structured learning communities can promote respect for difference among students and faculty and a deeper appreciation of the many ways in which diversity enriches the entire community. Listen again to a voice of another student as she speaks of her experience in a wonderfully diverse learning community:

“ I think more people should be educated in this form of education. I mean because it is good. We learn not only how to interact with ourselves, but with other people of different races, different sizes, different colors, different everything. I mean it just makes it better.”

Such experiences can also reinforce the development of positive intergroup affiliations. By requiring students to work together in mutually positive ways within the class, learning communities can help students overcome the many stereotypes that often shape campus intergroup relations. Put another way, if we want our campuses to be inclusive of all students, our academic environments must also promote that inclusion.

This leads me to argue that we, you and I together, should, no must, promote learning communities and the collaborative pedagogies that underlie them not merely for their impact on student success, but also because of their importance to the education of future citizens in our society. In our studies of learning communities we discovered that many students expressed a deepened appreciation of the importance of inclusive, supportive community in their lives. They seemed to awaken to the important notion that their own educational well-being was dependent on that of other members of the learning community; that it was in their own educational interest to be concerned with the educational needs of others; that in a very important way their learning and that of their peers was one and the same.

My point is really quite simple. By embracing learning communities, and the collaborative pedagogies that underlie them, we also promote forms of educational citizenship that prepare students to be effective citizens in an increasingly diverse America, students who come to understand, in ways that cannot be replicated by the sermons and homilies that frequently mark our conversation about diversity and responsibility on campus, that we live in an interdependent world in which one's welfare is inextricably interwoven with that of others. And if we, you and I do not act who will?

But for this to occur, the gateways we construct on our campuses must be broad, not narrow passages to subsequent success. They must expand access to success, not narrowly constrict it. The gates must be open to all students, not just some. Least we forget, the Western frontier was open to anyone, not just the privileged. As gatekeepers we should not require proof of entry as if being admitted to college is not sufficient proof of worthiness.

Here I am reminded of the wonderful play by Luis Valdez about a Latino student at a prestigious private university in the Northeast entitled "I Don't Need No Stinking Badges." The title of the play is taken from a line in the Humphrey Bogart movie "The Treasure of Sierra Madre." If you recall, Humphrey Bogart had attempted to steal the treasure of Sierra Madre. At one point, when attempting to escape from Mexico, he encountered a group of Mexicans. Seeing the treasure, one Mexican asked "where are you going with that gold?" Humphrey responded in a typical Bogart fashion something along the lines of "...what is it to you? You're not a sheriff. I don't see a badge." To which the Mexican responded "Yo hombre, here in Mexico I don't need no stinking badge!"

It is unfortunately the case that we too often we ask admitted students, especially those of color, to show their "badges" as if admittance wasn't enough proof of their belonging in college. As keepers of "the gates," you and I, and our faculty colleagues, must ensure that all students gain access to those pathways of opportunity.

We must also ensure that there are numerous gateways to success in college, not just a select few. Regrettably, we have a tendency to not only restrict access but also to privilege some "ports of entry" over others as if some gateways to learning were more valuable than others. We need be reminded that St. Louis was only one of a number of cities that served as gateways to the West.

But least we forget, gateways and the bridges that mark them have tolls. There is a price to pay. The programs I have described this morning require time. They call for us to reallocate how we spend our time and what rewards and incentives we provide to see that needed time is spent building these gateways. At the same time, learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them requires that we give up some of our treasured autonomy, that like our students, we too must become connected, interdependent, learners. "If we want to talk the talk, we must walk the walk."

To walk that walk, we must also be willing to have difficult dialogues with our colleagues and our students. If we truly value a shared discourse in which everyone's voice is included, we must be willing to include those voices even when they say things we find difficult. Negotiating the terrain of such dialogues is no simple matter.

Well should all the reasons I have provided fail to move you or your administrative and faculty colleagues, your institutions need to promote learning communities for a very simple reason. Namely they work. They serve as powerful gateways for student success, the hoped for goal of higher education. It really is that simple.

Let me close by urging you to reach out to others from whom you can learn much about learning communities and the many ways they are being implemented on campuses across the nation in ways which involve both faculty and student affairs professionals. First and foremost you should contact the people at the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College, specifically Barbara Leigh Smith, Jean McGreggor, and Jeanine Elliott. They have been involved in helping institutions in the State of Washington and now across the nation develop learning communities for over twenty years. Their web site, whose address is shown above, it a veritable gold mine of information about learning communities in higher education. And let me urge you to contact Catherine Engstrom and me at Syracuse University if we can be of any help. Our phone numbers and our e-mail addresses are provided above. You should know that a copy of my speech can be downloaded from the ACPA website or from our website at Syracuse University whose address is also shown above.

Thank you and good morning.

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Computer Resources on Learning Communities

Listservers Discussing Learning Communities:

The Learning Community listserv based at Temple University. To subscribe send e-mail message to:

listserv@vm.temple.edu Leave SUBJECT line blank. In the body of the message type:

subscribe learncom your name (first and last name)

The Living Learning Community listserv based at the University of Vermont. This listserv focuses on residential learning communities. To subscribe send e-mail message to:

listproc@list.uvm.edu Leave the subject line blank. In the body of the message type

subscribe icrcllc your name (first and last name)

Websites on Learning Communities:

The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education

[<http://192.211.16.13/Kalinks/washcntr/home.html>]

This is the site to begin your search. It provides a range of useful information about learning communities as well as a description of a wide-range of different types of learning communities throughout the nation.

Integrated Learning Garden at Maricopa Community College District

[<http://hakatai.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/ilc/index.html>]

A useful site that provides practical information on how to get started.

Iowa State University Learning Communities

[http://www.public.iastate.edu/registrar_info/learning.html]

Provides information on their various learning communities that link courses in a variety of different fields of study (e.g. agricultural business, food sciences).

Learning Communities at the University of Oregon

[<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/osap/learning.html>]

Information about their freshman interest groups from one of the pioneers of that type of learning community.

University of Michigan Learning Communities

[<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sas/firstyear/First.Year.Handbook/first.year.handbook97/FYHand.97/Learning.Communities.html>]

Besides having one of the longest web addresses I've come across, the site provides information about the range of learning communities on campus. One of the leaders in the use of residential learning communities.