

Learning Communities (LCOMs)

Context: The Academic Affairs (AA) Committee was asked to research learning communities in the fall of 2013. The committee was not given specific directions or parameters about how or what to research. At that time Mesa had not been recognized as an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) when research parameters were set nor had Mesa produced the Student Equity Plan at the time the research design was discussed. Post research, concerns have been expressed that the research design based only on student success, persistence and retention was not the most appropriate research design. The AA committee acknowledges these concerns and feel it is up to those who are planning the future of LCOMs to decide if they find value in the data offered.

Purpose: To explore the effectiveness of LCOMs across different institutions and states by researching the success, retention and persistence of LCOM student populations. The committee did not examine the programs offered at Mesa College as the committee felt this is best done by those involved with Mesa's programs and campus planners. The committee members agree it would be inappropriate to make claims about Mesa's programs regardless of whether they were positive or negative. The committee's intent was not to try to assess the success or importance of Mesa's LCOMs; rather, it was to offer the "big picture" from a national perspective. Again, the research was designed to be a comprehensive view of LCOMs, not commentary about a specific program. The committee did reach out to various parties and interested constituents and tried to accurately represent the input of those who replied by synthesizing them with the literature review and case studies considered by the committee.

This research is offered as a means for the campus to consider the value of LCOMS as part of student success and equity planning and is offered as a way to make these plans with a broad research scope--a basic, "eyes wide open" approach where the campus can discuss the benefits and possible pitfalls of LCOMs. The committee's hope is that if any new LCOMs are to be created at Mesa, they be shaped from an informed place with consideration of the data offered within the position paper. Additionally, the AA committee does not see this position paper as the end of the conversation on LCOMs, but rather as part of a larger campus

discussion; thus, it should not be treated as the definitive position of the academic senate and only treated for informational purposes concerning conversations about LCOMs.

Definition of Key Terms:

- **Learning Communities:** Paired or linked courses or cohorts in large courses. This committee's research did not consider:
 - Coordinated studies
 - Team-taught programs
 - Residence-based programs
- **Success:** Students who earned a passing grade of "C" or better
- **Retention:** Students who successfully completed either a class or a program
- **Persistence:** Students who successfully moved from the learning community on to other classes or higher level/college credit level coursework.

Research Methods: The research load was shared among all members of the committee. Each taking different regions of the United States and focused on institutions that are widely praised for their LCOMs or have significant student populations. Additionally, the committee conducted a literature review on LCOMs from peer-reviewed journal articles. The committee did not involve campus researcher, Bri Hayes due to a request from Vice President McGrath not to do so. The committee drew conclusion based on the outlined criteria and was only interested in the retention, success and persistence of students in LCOMs. The committee feels that other data points, such as student reported data, should also be included in the discussion but, again, fell outside the scope of research project of the AA committee.

Data Set:

- Hillborough Community College (Tampa, FL)
- Houston Community College (Houston, TX)
- Kingsborough Community College (Brooklyn, NY)
- Merced College (Merced, CA)
- Queensborough Community College (Queens, NY)
- Evergreen State College (Olympia, WA)

- Grossmont College (El Cajon, CA)
- Community College of Baltimore County (Cantonsville, MD)
- El Camino Community College (Torrance, CA)

Within the scope of the above listed programs, the committee found that most reported some success with the majority linked to basic skills courses but they were not implemented on a large scale beyond first year programs or once students entered 100 level courses.

Research Rationale: The committee feels the rationale offered in the position paper is clear and explicit: LCOMS, in general, are not successful when looking at a wide array of different institutions across the United States with the specific outcomes listed above. However, LCOMs can be a success for some students especially when they are fully funded, have adequate faculty and administrative support and target groups that benefit from this type of instruction. In addition, many learning communities may be considered successful or unsuccessful based on the goals of the LCOM planners. For the purposes of the committee work, programs that had less than 20% gains were considered unsuccessful. The committee's main concern was to consider whether the students in LCOMs were successful the majority of the time. In other words, did the majority of the students (51% or greater) who participated in LCOMs stay, pass and move on to the next term. The committee wants to stress the importance of careful planning and full institutional support to get significant gains from LCOMs.

Summary of Findings:

1. Programs for Hispanic and/or African-American students showed benefit from LCOMs
2. LCOMs have the greatest impact in basic skills courses
3. Most programs were not institutionalized and tended to show insignificant gains in student success, retention or persistence--some demonstrating no gains at all.
 - a. Note: The AA committee asserts that because of the lack of institutional support in most programs, there is no way to assess the levels of success that could be achieved with broader support.
4. AA supports a careful and thoughtful exploration of new LCOMs considering the offered data from AA as well as participatory conversations with all interested parties. The AA committee cautions the

campus to pilot new programs slowly with adequate plans for assessment of gains from the piloted programs and to take a deliberate approach to planning. The AA committee also recommends to consider other ways to help students with success, retention and persistence specifically where basic skills courses are a topic of discussion.

5. AA committee suggests that Mesa support existing and new LCOMs with full financial support which include appropriate staffing levels.
6. AA committee recommends considering new approaches to scheduling, marketing, training of staff and recruitment of students.

Limitations: The term "Learning Community" is broad and is applied to many different types of learning environments. This research is simply looking at those LCOMs that meet the above defined terms and did not consider the many orations that may be called Learning Communities.

Omissions: The committee did not consider student reported data. Again, the committee only considered objective outcome data. The committee recognizes the importance of qualitative data, but this was not part of the framework that guided the research or the conclusions. The committee recognizes that students' feelings about their programs and classes are important and should be considered when any plans are made for creating, maintaining or dissolving any program. A significant portion of the reported data from institutions with large LCOMs did not provide objective data. The committee contends that campus planners should be aware of this when looking to specific "successful" LCOMs.

Selection* of Sources Used in Preparing San Diego Mesa College Academic Affairs Committee's Position Paper

Regarding Learning Communities

D. V. Price. (2005) "Learning Communities and Student Success in Postsecondary Education: A

Background Paper." Available at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED489439.pdf>

E. Weissman, D. Cullinan, O. Cerna, S. Safran, & P. Richman (2012) "Learning Communities for Students in Developmental English: Impact Studies at Merced College and

The Community College of Baltimore County." Available at

http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_422.pdf

M. J. Weiss, M. Visher, & H. Wathington (2010) "Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Reading: An Impact Study at Hillsborough Community College" Available at <http://www.mdrc.org/publication/learning-communities-students-developmental-reading>

E. Weissman, K. Butcher, E. Schneider, J. Teres, H. Collado, & D. H. Greenberg (2011) "Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Math: Impact Studies at Queensborough and Houston Community Colleges" Available at <http://www.mdrc.org/publication/learning-communities-students-developmental-math>

M. G. Visher, M. J. Weiss, E. Weissman, T. Rudd, & H. Wathington (2012) "The Effects of Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Education: A Synthesis of Findings from Six Community Colleges" Available at http://www.postsecondaryresearch.org/i/a/document/23011_LCSynthesisFull.pdf
"Project Success: Grossmont Community College" in "The Pedagogy of Possibilities: Developmental Education, College-Level Studies, and Learning Communities" Available at <http://www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/about/monographs/pedagogy.html>

Project Success: Fall 2006 Demographics (Unduplicated) Available at <http://www.grossmont.edu/suejensen/data.htm>

Sample Longitudinal Data for Project Success (Provided by Project Success coordinator Joan Ahrens)

Interview with Mesa College former Learning Communities coordinators Jan Ellis, Leroy Johnson and Tracey Walker (February 24th, 2014)

G. R. Pike, G. D. Kuh, A. C. McCormick, (2008) "Learning Community Participation and Educational Outcomes: Direct, Indirect, and Contingent Relationships" Available at <http://cpr.iub.edu/uploads/ASHE%202008%20Paper%20-%20Pike%20Kuh%20McCormick%20Final.pdf>

El Camino College. Learning Communities Program Outcomes. Fall 2005-Fall 2009. Available at <http://www.elcamino.edu/administration/ir/docs/programs/LC%20summary%20Rev.pdf>

B. L. Smith & J. MacGregor (2009) "Learning communities and the quest for quality" in *Quality Assurance in Education*, 17:2 , 118-139 Available at <http://www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/docs/smithbarbaralearning.pdf>

S. Calhoon, (2008) "Recent Research on Freshman Learning Communities" Available at <http://institutionalmemory.iu.edu/aim/handle/10333/1116>

K. Cargill, B. Kalikoff (2007) "Linked Courses at the Twenty-First Century Metropolitan University" *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, v35 n2 p181-190 Available at <http://www.ncte.org/journals/tetyc/issues>

* Committee members also assembled and read a number of other published materials, though sources listed here were among the main resources used for the position paper.

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Motion to accept the document:

M/S

Seiger/Parsons

7 Abstained
Crocitti
Dougherty
Gerace
Higginbotham
Kanevsky
Marrujo
Sundayo