

## Learning Communities: Three Structural Frameworks

By “learning communities” we mean various approaches to *curricular reform* that depart from the usual pattern of teachers teaching separate classes in separate subjects to separate groups of students. They represent an intentional restructuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, among faculty and their students, and to build curricular connections across disciplines, professional and technical programs, and skill areas.

Learning communities vary based on the degree of curricular integration and degree of collaboration among faculty and staff. Whatever the learning community structure selected, the aim is to foster explicit social and intellectual connections among people and ideas. Three general patterns or structural frameworks include:

- *Learning communities within courses that are unmodified:* Ten to thirty students enroll in two or three larger classes taught by faculty members who do not change their syllabi or classroom practices. The students also enroll in an additional course that only they attend. One adaptation, *freshman interest groups (FIGs)*, aims to foster community at large institutions by regrouping students based on shared academic interests: an interdisciplinary theme, a topic-based inquiry, or study in the major. The focus of the additional course ranges from an orientation to campus support services, career exploration tied to academic advising, course-related study groups and skill-based workshops, service learning projects and/or field trips. A teaching assistant, a student peer mentor, academic advisor, counselor, faculty member, or combination of these in a teaching team may facilitate FIGs, whose credit hours range from zero to three. Another adaptation to this structure, the *integrative seminar* or *colloquy*, uses the additional course to deepen student learning and build community through theme-based reading, discussion, research projects, and/or service- or civic-based learning. A faculty team, usually teachers of the larger classes, convene the seminar.
- *Learning communities of linked or clustered classes:* Students co-register in two or more courses that are explicitly linked by content or theme. Faculty coordinate syllabi and assignments, and work intentionally to foster community through social and curricular connections that occur within the linked, but distinct courses. *Linked or paired courses* are often scheduled back-to-back to facilitate collaborative work, the time at the end of one class and the beginning of another an opportunity for the teaching team to be present for project work, seminars, and group presentations. Introductory skill-building classes such as composition, speech, information literacy, and computer applications are often linked to content-heavy courses. When two or more courses are linked they are often referred to as a *cluster*. Both links and clusters enroll a “pure cohort” where approximately twenty-five to thirty students attend each class, and only these students are enrolled in the classes. Some links and clusters connect larger general education courses with smaller classes such as writing, study strategies, or speech, which incorporate the content of the larger class into their curriculum.
- *Team-taught learning communities:* Students enroll in a fully team-planned and team-taught program of study across disciplines and skill areas that usually focuses on an integrating theme, question, issue, or topic. Faculty teaching teams sometimes include counselors, student affairs professionals, and librarians, and the teaching team’s preparation for class constitutes their own learning community. The program may earn part-time or full-time credit, last one term, or be designed as a one or two-year program of integrated study. Learning opportunities for students include seminars, internships, laboratory studies, service learning, and extended research projects.

