LEARNING COMMUNITIES ACTION PLANNING GUIDE:
KEY QUESTIONS AND ISSUES TO ADDRESS

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FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES TO ADDRESS

1. How do you define a learning community? What is the main organizing construct (i.e. student engagement)? What research-based principles are essential in the design process?
2. What are the primary purposes, goals, objectives and desired outcomes of your L.C.’s?
3. What model(s) are most suitable for implementation? What is the optimal participant size and composition?
4. Who are the principal stakeholders that must be included in the design and implementation process? What are their primary roles and responsibilities?
5. What are the most appropriate administrative / management structures for implementing and coordinating your L.C.’s?
6. What are the primary characteristics and desired features of the L.C.’s?
7. What is a realistic timeline for creating and implementing L.C.’s?
8. What evaluation and assessment strategies are most appropriate for determining the efficacy of the learning community program?

COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC ISSUES

The following are common, strategic issues that must be addressed early in the planning process:

1. **Purpose.** What are the primary purposes of learning communities? How will they contribute to student engagement, learning and success? Will they improve retention and graduation rates, grades, academic and social integration, satisfaction, etc? How will they contribute to enhancing undergraduate education? **Bottom-line:** *What would students miss if they did not participate in a learning community?* Key planning principle ---“**Begin with the end in mind**”.

2. **Composition.** How many and what kinds of students will be involved in the first year of implementation? What subgroups of students are most likely to benefit than others…freshmen; lower ability / underprepared / high ability / Honors; students of color; residents / commuters; undeclared; those in academically rigorous, high risk (i.e. “killer”) courses; transfers, etc?

3. **Size.** What is the optimal size and mix (i.e. male / female) for various L.C. ’s?
4. **Models / structures.** Will L.C.’s be structured around one (i.e. FIG) or more (i.e. Sponsored Learning Community / Living Learning Centers) models? Will the L.C.’s include residential as well as non-residential settings? Should technology be utilized to create “virtual learning communities”?

5. **Stakeholders.** What key stakeholders must be involved in the planning and implementation process...registrar; residence life; general education; associate dean(s); faculty development; admissions; orientation; learning center / academic support / early-alert staff; advising; Honors College; others? Who will appoint a “stakeholder group” that provides ongoing guidance and coordination to insure the success of the program?

6. **Focus / interest /themes.** Should the communities be structured around academic themes (i.e. Pre-Med; Pre-Nursing; Pre-Education; Women in Science; America’s Diversity, Global Awareness, etc.)? Should the communities reflect academic interests of the freshmen class (i.e. high demand majors)? Are various departments, schools and colleges interested in “sponsoring” learning communities (i.e. The World of Business; Women in Engineering)? Are their important institutional themes (i.e. global engagement; community service, sustainability, etc.) that lend themselves to learning community design?

7. **Courses.** How many courses should be blocked / linked for each community? Which general education courses are most appropriate? Are courses in high demand majors suitable as well? Based upon desired L.C. size, should one course be the *primary linking course* (i.e. English composition)? Should various “high risk courses” be included in some communities? Should FYE courses be included as part of the linked strategy?

8. **Faculty/ Academic Deans.** How much faculty involvement is desirable? Which faculty members are most supportive of learning communities? How can they be recruited / engaged in the design and implementation process? What range of involvement, roles and responsibilities are appropriate for them? Should academic deans be advocates and champions for learning communities? If so, how?

9. **Academic expectations.** What academic expectations (i.e. effort; peer support; group studying, etc.) are appropriate for students participating in learning communities? How are these expectations communicated and by whom? Are there consistent messages that should be common to all communities? What role can “anticipatory socialization” play in establishing appropriate expectations for participating in learning communities? Are there duties and responsibilities that student assume when they are granted the privilege of joining a learning community?

10. **Out-of-class experiences.** What out-of-class experiences can be structured to intentionally support in-class learning objectives? Should study groups, field trips, collaborative learning, etc. be considered as “core experiences” for various
communities …experiences that complement core curriculum objectives? Who should be responsible for coordinating out-of-class / co-curricular experiences?

11. **Coordination.** Who will be responsible for the overall coordination of the learning community initiative? Will responsibility and accountability be shared by agents in academic and student affairs? If so, who are those agents and what roles and responsibilities, along with authority, must they assume?

12. **Peer advisors / community leaders.** Can current student staff positions be modified to focus on learning community coordination and support? For example, can resident advisor (RA) positions be redesigned / structured as “peer advisors” (P.A. ‘s)? What are the most desirable characteristics (skills, abilities, orientations) for peer advisors and how do they differ from resident advisors? How will peer assistants be recruited … selected … oriented … trained … supervised … compensated … evaluated … recognized / rewarded? Who will develop the peer advisor job description? How will R.A. and P.A. roles and responsibilities be differentiated and reconciled … will compensation be similar? What will be the primary responsibilities of the peer advisors (P.A. ‘s) … academic agents that work primary on behalf of the faculty teaching the linked courses (knowing course learning objectives and outcomes; assisting student prepare for classes; coordinating evening study groups, etc.?)

13. **Timelines.** Compile and overlap all calendars and schedules for relevant stakeholders / departments, including admissions and recruitment, advising and registration, orientation, planning and publication, residence hall contracting and assignment, etc. View selection to completion as a process that crosses multiple units, departments and even divisions. Key planning principle: An organization is a relay team … the better the handoffs, the better the results.

14. **Challenging logistical issues and concerns.** Who “owns” learning communities? What procedures must students follow to participate? Who is responsible for the signup process? What are the most appropriate application / assignment deadlines? How (and by whom) are learning community assignments made? When and how are students informed of their learning community assignment? If certain L.C. ‘s are not filled during pre-registration, can students signup during summer orientation? What happens if certain learning communities are undersubscribed …oversubscribed? How are advanced placement and pre-college credit addressed in the assignment process? How are roommate requests and changes addressed? What happens if students drop one or more classes required in their learning community? Similarly, what happens if students want a learning community in a residence hall that doesn’t have the amenities they desire? Who is responsible for selecting the blocked and / or linked courses … the residence halls / floors … holding appropriate seats in selected courses … determining when those seats must be released, etc.? When students and parents have questions concerning L.C. ‘s, who do they contact for answers? Who communicates and it what venues the nature, benefits and procedures associated with learning
community affiliation … what roles are appropriate for admission recruiters, academic advisors, orientation staff…academic leaders, etc.? Who is responsible for informing the broader institutional constituents about the purpose and importance of L.C. participation? What institutional agents or agencies are responsible for evaluating the efficacy of the LC program and communicating the results? What role should parents play in helping their sons and daughters consider the benefits of participation? Should L.C. ’s include one or two semesters?

15. **Assessment / evaluation.** Establish assessment criteria prior to initiating the learning community program. Consider minimally using grade point average (controlling for entering ability levels), retention, satisfaction and general education outcomes. Utilize both qualitative and quantitative assessment techniques. Institute a longitudinal study, tracking participants throughout their college careers. In addition, incorporate learning community participation as a variable in annual National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) administrations to determine the degree to which LC participants are more or less engaged than non-participants. Finally, use data for ongoing performance improvement. Key planning principles: *What gets measured gets done.* And, *measurement without feedback is just data…feedback without measurement is just opinion.*