Learning Communities and Best Practices

"Learning communities are the pedagogical embodiment of the belief that teaching and learning are relational processes, involving co-creating knowledge through relationships among students, between students and teachers, and through the environment in which these relationships operate" (Price 2005: 6).

Learning communities are not new to educational reform. Studies show that learning communities improve academic performance and retention (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006). Reports also indicate positive outcomes from enhanced engagement between faculty, as well as faculty and students. The same report showed new partnerships, new programs, and professional development are essential to sustainability (Levine & Shapiro, 2004). Based on the 2009 experience of six community colleges that implemented 130 learning communities with 3,000 students, key findings indicated that student cohorts resulted in academic and personal support networks. Additionally, changes in teaching practices required support from a paid coordinator who set expectations and managed the learning communities (Visher, Schneider, Wathington, & Collado, 2010). Finally, Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York randomly assigned 1,534 freshmen to either a learning community or a control group. Findings showed students in the learning community had improved college experience and accelerated movement through developmental English (Scrivener, et al., 2008).

First Time in College

Many FTIC students arrive in community colleges without college-ready academic skills and are thus more likely to drop out than students at more selective four-year institutions (Fike, 2008). Specifically, Bahr notes that community college students require more remedial math assistance than any other subject (Bahr, 2011). One significant issue is the variety of academic career options available to these students: transfer, vocational, drop-in, noncredit, experimental, and exploratory (Bahr, 2010). Institutions are faced with students who may only take one or two courses before transferring out, students who migrate from academic transfer to vocational programs

(and vice versa), and students who are unsure of their career paths and are therefore "shopping" courses and majors.

<u>Success Network</u>

As a framework for student support, Astin's Theory of Student Involvement maintains that students who are engaged in their learning are more likely to be successful (Astin, 1985). Furthermore, Tinto (2012) found in a study on college success and completion that students involved in learning communities had increased success rates, citing that academic advising, career advising, counseling services, health services, and mentoring services all played a role in student retention and success when utilized by students. Tinto (2012) went on to state that institutions with high retention rates among first-year students often utilize learning communities to require student interaction with support services (p. 103). Extensive literature, not reviewed here, can be found on each of these support areas individually, supporting their utilization throughout many institutions.

The Learning Communities Demonstration (Weissman et al., 2012) applied these support areas to learning communities and found that these services are often enhanced within the learning community setting to give students greater access to and understanding of these resources on campus. Furthermore, more advanced learning communities were described as having dedicated resources within these support areas to serve the learning community. This is often seen in cooperation with a student success course as part of the learning community.

In addition to traditional support services, Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) states that one key to the success of the student's participating in a learning community is to foster student development through initiatives that build community, create active learning, stimulate student intellectual and identity development, and allow for student assessment and reflection. These initiatives can be met within a learning

community through programs, events, and out-of-class assignments. Smith et al. (2004) additionally identify these support objectives as part of the core purposes of effective learning communities.

<u>Journey to Success</u>

The purpose of a success offering is to develop Tutor to student interaction and engagement, an understanding and usage of supportive student services, and an understanding of the expectations of the academic environment. Topics include the following:

▫ Keys to Success

▫ On Course Self-Assessment

▫ Overview of online learning management system, D2L

▫ Academic Action Plan

▫ Support Resources

▫ Accepting Personal Responsibility

▫ Discovering Self-Motivation

▫ Mastering Self-Management

▫ Employing Interdependence

▫ Gaining Self Awareness

▫ Adopting Lifelong Learning

▫ Avoiding Test Anxiety

▫ Staying On Course to Your Success

(Excerpts from: http://www.blinn.edu/QEP/literature-review-best-practices.pdf)