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Undergraduate Education

NATIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES PROJECT  
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RESIDENCE LIFE & DINING  
SERVICE

March 10, 2003

Rollin Abernethy  
Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs  
University of Wyoming  
Laramie, Wyoming 82071

Dear Rollin:

We very much enjoyed our recent visit to your campus. Thanks for your warm hospitality and good planning. Our intent in this letter is briefly to describe our visit, identify distinguishing features and strengths of your learning communities, and offer recommendations for the next stage of work. As discussed during the visit, we strongly suggest that you use this letter to convene relevant groups, using it as a basis for discussion and further planning.

### The Visit

Our visit began with a dinner with the two key learning community leaders, Beth McCuskey and Rollin Abernethy. Over dinner we reviewed the goals for the visit and learned much more about the University of Wyoming.

On Thursday we had a very full day visiting with the Learning Community team, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and the Vice President for Student Affairs. A meeting late in the morning gave us the opportunity to meet with key individuals in student affairs where we discussed the role of residence life in learning communities. A highlight of the day was a lunch meeting with the deans and some department heads where we learned more about their sense of learning communities and how they fit into their schools and department's goals.

In the afternoon we met with 16-20 "I" faculty who described what their "I" course would be. Some of these "I" courses would be part of a learning community. A number of the faculty attending this session were not familiar with learning communities so this session also became a time to talk about what learning communities are. From this session we gained a much deeper sense of what the faculty's sense of "I" courses as participants described their intentions. It is clear that some are thinking of "I" courses as a course aimed at majors while others see them as

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more general offering for students from across the university. This group seemed to really enjoy hearing from one another.

An energetic late afternoon session was with the University Studies Committee and the faculty who received learning community grants. Each of the grant recipients described their respective learning community (LC) projects in some detail. One was a deeply integrated learning community combining oral and written communication. A second focused on a large Human Anatomy course and involved developing labs tailored to specific sub-groups such as students in allied health. This seemed to be a very significant way of thinking about large science courses with labs that is potentially transferable to other courses. A third grant focused on leadership with potentially deep links to various student leadership roles and activities on campus. The leaders of this LC had done impressive research on leadership programs at other institutions.

Dinner was with the UW assessment of student learning team. The importance of assessing the outcomes of learning communities was discussed during this social event.

The second day of our visit began with a well-attended breakfast meeting with learning community students and FIG resident assistants, and UNST 1000 peer mentors. This meeting provided a rich opportunity to hear about the work on the ground. FIG students indicated that resident assistants and peer mentors are highly regarded and very important in learning communities. They told us how the resident assistants and peer mentors made them feel welcome to the university, helped organize study groups and created social opportunities for the students. All of the students said this relationship had been important in making their transition to the University of Wyoming successful. The peer mentors also articulated how important the role of peer mentor had been for them personally and what they had learned from this. This meeting was followed by an hour with the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning. This Center has a comfortable meeting space and an admirably broad program for the campus. A final exit interview was held with the learning community team and the Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) as well as a brief meeting with the president.

## STRENGTHS

There are many institutional strengths that will help ensure UW's ability to move forward in its overall commitment to increasing student success, improving retention and graduation rates, and establishing a learning-centered culture. Many of these are incidental to the specific strategy of learning communities, and not all of the institutional assets can or should be named in this report. However, the overall institutional success will depend in large part in following the overarching goals for the University. Those charged specifically with developing learning communities as an effective means to larger learning objectives may wish to keep in mind the opportunity represented by several specific strengths.

1. **People**

One of the principal assets of UW for implementing successful learning communities is the commitment, knowledge, and enthusiasm of key individuals. Among those we encountered on the site visit, several are worthy of mention as groups or persons on whose characteristics future programming can be built.

- a. "T" course faculty are an identifiable, emergent group who will play an important role in creating part of the new Universities Studies program. There will be multiple models—some oriented to recruiting and encouraging majors, others intended to form a foundation for intellectual development as service courses to the overall baccalaureate objectives; some designed for homogenous groups of students, others to use diversity as an asset of learning. These multiple goals and approaches are desirable as long as they fit within a coherent, overarching learning objective.
- b. Learning Community Grant recipients have an enthusiasm and a creativity that warrants dissemination of their work as models to stimulate other faculty to think in new ways about opportunities that may have seemed unavailable or even unimportant. The four funded projects should be a beginning, and the progress of these pilots should be monitored closely with help to correct unforeseen difficulties and with opportunities to celebrate success.
- c. The newly recruited team of Student Affairs administrators provides an impressive opportunity to forge linkages between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs that can be the most important ingredient for success in the next few years. There is a potential for an unusual degree of consistency of purpose and a willingness to adapt working styles to accommodate the shared goals of these units. The Student Affairs staff has a well-developed sense of academic objectives and a commitment to student academic success. Given the comparative youth of the staff as members of the UW community, this attitude needs to be cultivated and nurtured lest it become frustrated and turn elsewhere to apply energy and imagination in ways less fully integrated with academic objectives.
- d. Specifically, the partnership between Rollin Abernathy and Beth McCuskey is an ideal model for other relationships among the Academic Affairs and Student Affairs staff. Their shared rhetoric, vision, and commitment are natural and easy; there is no evidence of a forced or indifferent engagement. This level of communication and, apparently, trust is a model for others to emulate at all levels.

2. **Shared Opportunities**

As a result of the growing relationship between Academic affairs and Student Affairs, there are several opportunities for further programmatic development. The items noted below are not exhaustive but examples that became apparent in a very brief site

visit. The opportunities grow out of shared interests and mutual benefit—not a need for one unit to dominate or impose its views on the other.

- a. The need to increase occupancy rates of the residence halls over the long term offers an excellent opportunity to develop programs that will be attractive to students and yet meet specific academic objectives—learning communities being the most obvious example. The creation of houses devoted to academic purpose (the second honors house and the health sciences community for transfer students) offer specific examples that can be replicated. Evidence of the value of such endeavors (as varied as improved retention or reduction in police involvement in addressing “incident” reports) can help shape the programs and provide the grounds for expanded communities of interest with academic objectives.
- b. The plans for a new “colloquium” to occur midway through the fall semester offers another opportunity for shared academic and social purposes. While the colloquium will address some of the orientation experiences that may be lost as a result of repurposing the University Studies course, this is also an opportunity to instill in students a sense of common academic and social purpose by the way in which information is provided to the students. Offering this opportunity at a time when students are ready to hear it is an important consideration.
- c. Due to mutual needs, Student Affairs and Academic Affairs should consider joint market research to determine what programs will be attractive to students for residential life (including remaining in the residence halls for multiple years) and for learning objectives. Merely having a conversation about respective marketing research needs may lead to unexpected but highly beneficial methods and results.

**3. University Studies Program**

The newly restructured University Studies Program is a major strength that needs to be used to develop programs and enhance existing efforts.

- a. The comprehensive nature of the program makes it necessary and useful to look at linkages between and among disciplines—a fact that can reinforce the value of learning communities in any one of several configurations.
- b. The fact that USP is university-wide creates a venue for taking up global learning objectives and creating the context within which specific initiatives such as learning communities can flourish.
- c. The new program appears to enjoy widespread support and an openness to making the new approach a success. Because the program is not yet set in concrete, there are opportunities to embellish, taking into account the specific contribution of learning communities and other active learning pedagogies (e.g., service-learning or undergraduate research);
- d. Specifically, the overlap of learning communities with the objectives of USP offers the ideal ground on which new programming can be built.



**4. University Planning Process**

The latest iteration of the university planning process, "Moving Forward 3," and Academic Plan II offer an important vehicles for addressing the role of learning communities within the overall academic objectives of the campus.

- a. The dissemination of the documents affords the Vice President for Academic Affairs a specific opportunity to articulate the overarching vision for student success and the development of a learning-centered culture by highlighting components of the report and by drawing together separate ideas and initiatives into a coherent vision for learning communities specifically and the overarching ideas for which learning communities are a means.
- b. The rhetoric of Moving Forward 3 and Academic Plan II should be reviewed carefully to understand how learning community concepts are reflected; if additional commentary or explication outside the plan itself is needed, then the Academic Affairs staff (with support from Student Affairs) should address the need—using the plan itself as an occasion to advance the learning community agenda.

**5. Existing Models**

There are several strong models for learning communities that should be encouraged and cited as a stimulus to further development. The fact that they are different and do not have a uniformity should be viewed as an asset. These include:

- a. Honors, noteworthy for its integration of academic purpose across the four years of study and for its effective use of a residential base;
- b. Project Synergy, noteworthy for its integration of courses and emphasis on students conditionally admitted to the institution;
- c. Engineering Power Groups, noteworthy for its success and strong support from faculty (as well as an appreciation for the effectiveness of the program by deans and faculty outside engineering);
- d. Health sciences, noteworthy for strong student support and a recognition of the academic objectives of the FIG.

**6. Peer Mentors and Residential Advisors**

These students are major assets in their enthusiasm, commitment, and knowledge of the institution. These arbiters of the official university and the de facto life of the university as lived by students are key to many students' success, and the student leaders are highly valued by the students. While there is need for greater training with respect to the academic aspects of the positions, these key students should be used more effectively in all forms of learning communities.

**7. The Learning Communities Summit**

This event of a year ago remains an important touch point in the development of effective learning communities, and it can serve as a reference for the coming year. By drawing on the shared experience as a way of grounding participants in future work, the sense of evolution and continuity can be reinforced while introducing new ideas and reforming less successful activities. The Summit should remain an important part of the vocabulary and the documentation of learning communities.

**8. Writing Courses**

The nearly universal application of writing courses to all academic programs offers a special opportunity for linking courses and, more importantly, integrating learning objectives. The deployment of graduate assistants and lecturers as the principal staff for writing courses makes it more likely that the integration can occur if the writing staff positions are defined with this as a part of the position description. Writing courses are an under used asset for learning communities at this point, but one of the best potentials for future development—especially given the leadership of the department chair and the apparent commitment of many of the writing instructors.

**9. Center for Teaching and Learning**

The Center should be one of the principal means for developing learning communities in all their forms through the strategic preparation of groups for use of active pedagogies. Specifically, the Center should be used as a means of implementing specific objectives of the Moving Forward 3 planning document. The Vice President for Academic Affairs can play a key role in discussing the way in which the Center will help the University achieve specific initiatives.

**10. The Learning Communities Grant Program**

The initial grant program was highly successful in several ways and should be continued—even expanded.

- a. The RFP process is an important vehicle for communicating the purpose and priority of learning communities, and the opportunity to use the RFP as a communication means should be fully exploited, especially in its second iteration;
- b. The four funded projects offer excellent examples to stimulate further thinking and should be followed closely to provide ways for other faculty to imagine themselves engaged in a learning community as a means to achieve their own specific goals;
- c. The members of the committee itself are assets whose talents and interests should be further “exploited” to develop specific projects or to encourage other faculty.

**11. Deans and Chairs**

The deans and chairs (only a few chairs were present for the site visit meeting) offer a real asset for learning community development because the deans are both well informed about the purpose and nature of learning communities and because they appear to be ready to take the next step in developing learning communities as a means to the larger institutional learning objectives. They are "on board" and their interest needs to be harnessed in specific ways. Carefully planned discussions of learning communities may be a way to reinforce the public commitment of deans to learning communities within the larger context of the academic objectives of the University.

**12. Presidential Leadership**

Although the President was out of town during the site visit, many people referred to his effective leadership style of engaging the University's constituents in one-on-one meetings to develop consensus on key points. This is a style and a strategy worthy of emulation within the university as leaders charged with advancing the academic agenda at several levels of the organization develop action and results by engaging the key constituents one-on-one.

**13. Commitment to Retention**

An asset that may be overlooked is the widespread commitment to improvement in undergraduate retention across the campus—among faculty, deans, chairs, Student Affairs Staff, and Academic Affairs Staff. This understanding of the value of retention as intrinsic to the purpose of the University and its service to the state of Wyoming is a background of considerable potency in advancing specific strategies, such as learning communities.

**14. Wyoming on the Brink**

The development of learning communities is clearly at a decisive moment. Following the waning of activity following the highly energizing summit of a year ago, the momentum for developing learning communities could plateau or decline. This current year has seen a diminished commitment of energy, in part due to waiting for the Universities Studies decisions to be made. It now appears that this is the staging moment for the next big push forward—when there is a renewed energy and multiple activities building on the USP reforms, the strong existing models, the interest of students in whether the peer mentor role will be continued and brought into the learning community model, and the grant program—which should be expanded. Moreover, the readiness of deans and chairs is also a factor in making a major move at this time. The public dissemination and discussion of this report should be a catalyst for the next step.

## Recommendations

### Clarifying Goals/Focus

The university is now at a critical turning point in several important arenas relating to undergraduate education. Both the learning community effort and the new general education program are at a critical crossroads. You need to make the most of this opportunity. What we sense is needed now is a broad conversation about learning communities and the role they should play at UW. In different ways a number of people indicated that this discussion is needed. Some said "we've stuck our toe in the water but haven't yet decided whether to swim." We heard versions of this comment from a number of different people. Clarifying goals, especially with respect to the new University Studies Program is important, but the learning community discussion shouldn't be limited to that. Also consider the role of learning communities vis-à-vis other possibilities such as learning communities for special populations, transfer students, etc.

It will also be important to consider what learning community models you want to embrace and why. Thus far, you have a range of models focusing on specific areas of study, such as engineering, nursing or business, and several aimed at special populations such as Honors or Synergy. Your models have different levels of faculty involvement and integration of content. You are moving away from the UNST1000 course as the integrating element, hoping to increase faculty involvement. Think about best practices and which learning community elements you want to emphasize. The role of peer mentors, for example, deserves thoughtful consideration. This defining moment, a crossroads really, gives you latitude to engage in this deeper conversation.

### University Studies Program and Learning Communities

The new USP curriculum is an obvious arena for learning community development, but this is an arena you have barely begun to examine from this point of view. It would be a mistake to only think of the "I" courses as the connector. Other elements such as the writing and communications courses, the integrated science course (a possible focus of a NSF-funded initiative? Check out what the University of Wisconsin is doing in this regard with science and LC's), and the integrated cultural context course are possible arenas for LC development. Because these arenas are already named and in policy, it will probably be easier to convene the necessary conversations around them. Learning communities work best when they build on actual student needs such as these. In many institutions learning communities are popular because they provide a coherent and efficient pathway through general education. We suspect that your general education and your learning community initiatives will both be best served by working together.

Part of clarifying goals is surfacing differences and talking them through. One issue that came up was around an academic success center and the desire to avoid the remediation model. At the



same time, we heard numerous comments about student needs for support. This is a good debate to have when achieving greater student success is the goal.

### Leadership

Leadership is especially important at this critical juncture, particularly since there are several potentially inter-related initiatives coming together now (Moving Forward 3, University Studies, and LC's). Key leaders need to be active in setting the agenda and broadening the conversation to take maximal advantage of the opportunities. This leadership must come from the VPAA, the VP for Student Affairs, the deans, department chairs, Rollin and Beth, the University Studies Committee, and the LC team. During our conversations people in various leadership positions expressed their opinions and expectations about who should lead. While the obvious answer is that everyone needs to play a role, someone does need to set the tone and convene the conversations, starting with the VPAA. Without coordination, your initiatives could easily operate on separate tracks. It seemed that the VPAA understood the need to ensure both vertical and horizontal involvement around the Moving Forward planning process to ensure that cross-cutting issues such as University Studies and Learning Communities are not left out of a process that is focused, at the same time, on departments.

Rollin has a key role in all of this. He is highly placed and heavily involved in a number of related enterprises (assessment, general education, learning communities, new faculty development), but it will be difficult to really do the work required if he doesn't have more help. We recommend that this issue be squarely faced and that a more robust administrative support system be put in place. You need leadership to forge links between learning communities, USP, an Academic Success Center (if established) and your total first year program effort. This needs to be someone who understands faculty and academic goals but also appreciates the contribution of student support services. This should also include a more active and focused Learning Community Advisory Committee along with appropriate structures to oversee and assist University Studies implementation. You might want to look at Iowa State's LC administrative structure in terms of the tasks it has identified as central. It has a formal Advisory Committee with three sub-committees (assessment, peer mentors, curriculum development and enhancement).

As noted above, we were highly impressed with the relationship between academic and student affairs and believe this is something to hold on to and build. We recommend that you have explicit conversations about their role in learning communities in the future. As you've moved away from the previous Freshman Seminar model, it isn't clear what this role will be in the future. While this seems like the right move, there may be some feeling of being displaced (or at least anxiety about the future relationship) that needs addressing. It would be a mistake to let the present opportunity pass without continuing to deepen this partnership.

### **Communication**

Improving communication vertically and horizontally is important as you attempt to implement change initiatives. Natural communication channels exist within departments, and to a lesser degree, within schools, but some of the initiatives you are now working on are across the institution and organizational units. Finding ways for conversations to happen across units is important. These need to be built into the existing rhythms of the institution as a way of keeping your reform efforts on track. The VPAA is key in ensuring this happens among the deans, and the deans are key in ensuring this happens within departments. You've done some excellent work building a team between academic and student affairs (especially between Rollin and Beth) but need to be sure that all of the connections you need are in place.

It will be critical as you build your programs to do some concerted work on marketing and recruitment so that your learning communities fill with the right students. We noted that your catalog didn't even mention LC's. Students also expressed the opinion that you need to aggressively promote these since they work so well. They also stressed the need to ask students what they need and create regular channels of communication with students, not just through general focus groups. In our discussion with them, several FIG groups (nursing and multicultural FIG's) expressed a desire for the LC to go into a second semester. They also stressed the need to carefully select the linked courses indicating that sometimes the wrong combinations discouraged registration. Listen to students is what they told us to tell you.

### **Assessment**

We recommend that you develop an assessment plan that is formative and summative of LCs and University studies so that you can continue to monitor and improve your programs. Educating people to the value of classroom-based assessment is also important. Involving venues need to be created for reflecting on and using the information. While retention rates are one obvious measure, it is important to assess this over time since we know that increasingly long-term retention and graduation rates are usually associated with participation in learning communities. You might look at the attached assessment staircase as you think about your goals. Ask yourselves which of these goals are important. We also encourage you to learn from others; the assessment work at institutions like Iowa State and IUPUI is worth emulating. We believe the most important aspect of assessment is often the process itself and the continuing dialogue that can result from it.

### **Engaging Faculty**

Engaging more faculty will be crucial almost regardless of what needs rise to the top of your list of priorities. This is a theme—and a concern—we heard in virtually every conversation we were part of during the visit, and certainly research and practice at the national level confirm that the involvement of faculty is key to significant institutional transformation and improvement. It is also, typically, a challenge. What might help? Stressing retention probably shouldn't be the only way to frame this conversation with faculty. As one provost at another university put it,

“retention is good but it isn’t interesting to faculty.” Learning communities need to be understood as a route to deeper forms of student understanding and as way of transforming lives. Of course there’s a chicken and egg dynamic here: this rationale is hard to surface unless LCs really focus on substantive curricular connections. We know from learning communities elsewhere the faculty are most engaged in learning communities when they involve team planning and team teaching and some reinvention of the curriculum. We believe UW faculty will rise to the challenge of higher expectations in terms of the models you use, especially since you have this crucial window of opportunity with the University Studies revision.

As you think about ways to reach out to faculty, we encourage you to rely upon personal communication. Go out and directly talk with faculty you want to recruit. Pay attention to strong teaching faculty with compatible interests who might strengthen the learning community effort. Their other interests (undergraduate research, service-learning, etc.) can serve as an initial basis of conversation. Ask them to help you.

Other ideas—Build on the small PFF program. Scale up and use your successful small LC grant program to solicit new ideas and involve faculty. Figure out ways to communicate to deans, department chairs and faculty about successful LC models so that they can inspire others. A number of your small grant-funded LCs can be thought of as pilots that might be continued and expanded; this seemed especially true of the communications LC and the Human Anatomy LC experiment. In the long run using the hiring process to recruit people who will support LCs and educational improvement efforts is a necessary strategy.

### **Faculty Development**

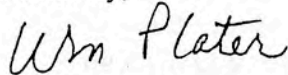
Faculty development needs to be a priority. We encourage you to develop a concerted faculty development effort focusing on the new University Studies Program and learning communities. The Center for Teaching and Learning is nicely situated to play a key role in this. Pedagogical as well as content goals are important here, but simply creating venues for reflection and sharing also matters. If critical thinking is a major “I” goal, for example, maybe a series of workshops on critical thinking would be good (Jerry Cederblom at the University of Nebraska-Omaha or Karl Smith at University of Minnesota or Steven Brookfield come to mind on this topic).

We recognize that getting substantial numbers of faculty involved is always a challenge. It may be that you need to emphasize a particular time of year, such as early summer. Making the Summit an on-going tradition is one fruitful strategy. At Iowa State they now regularly offer a comparable event and several hundred people attend and it has become a recruiting ground for future participants. Another strategy is to take the faculty development program to different units and think about the CTL playing more of an outreach consultant role with specific initiatives, such as learning communities.

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March 10, 2003  
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Thank you again for the privilege of working with your campus. You have an unusual opportunity for constructive change. We look forward to hearing about your progress.

Sincerely,



William M. Plater  
Interim Chancellor  
IUPUI



Barbara Leigh Smith  
Co-director National Learning Communities Project

cc: Phil Dubois, President  
Tom Buchanan, Vice President of Academic Affairs  
Leellen Brigman, Vice President of Student Affairs  
Beth McCuskey, Director of Residence Life and Dining Services

Attachment: Assessment Staircase



# Ascending Steps of Learning Community Goals & Impacts

by Jean MacGregor, National Learning Communities Project, The Evergreen State College

*Work-in-progress and improvements welcomed! (MacJean@evergreen.edu). This will appear in Smith, MacGregor, Matthews and Gabelnick, Learning Communities: Re-forming Undergraduate Education,, forthcoming 2003, Jossey-Bass. The stair-step visual is not meant to imply that one outcome leads to a higher one; rather, it has to do with the kinds of goals LC leaders articulate for their programs, and the kinds of assessment and evaluation evidence that is gathered. Too often, both goal-setting and evidence-gathering are aiming too low on the staircase. Moving to "higher outcomes" is hard--but ultimately worthwhile-- work.*

enhanced leadership skills  
new or reaffirmed values, aspirations, commitment  
increased intellectual development, cognitive complexity  
academic maturity, self-confidence and motivation  
deepened diversity and citizenship understandings and skills  
sense of community with fellow students, teachers and institution  
demonstration of learning outcomes; (related to courses, LC program, gen ed, study in major/minor)  
achievement (grades, overall GPA, entry into majors, pass-rates for proficiency tests, licensing exams)  
retention, progress to degree, grad rates - (course completion, persistence, completion of requirements, grad rates)  
increased interaction with other students, faculty, student affairs professionals  
general response - level of satisfaction, perceived benefits and/or challenges  
participation and enrollment  
**STUDENT LEVEL**

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enhanced leadership skills  
increased self-confidence and motivation  
widened scholarly interests and efforts  
new understandings of other disciplines, and the nature of interdisciplinarity  
new understandings of discipline or professional specialty  
deepened diversity understandings and multicultural teaching skills  
enlarged pedagogical repertoire  
sense of community and shared educational mission with other faculty and staff  
deepened understanding of students, student development, and student needs  
increased interaction with students  
general response - level of satisfaction, perceived benefits and/or challenges  
participation  
**LEARNING COMMUNITY TEACHER LEVEL**  
Faculty, student affairs staff, student facilitators

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new or reaffirmed values, aspirations, commitment  
enhanced institutional reputation  
strengthened institutional culture, e.g. focus on learning, and community  
hiring, tenure, promotion and other reward systems supportive of LC goals  
increased cost efficiencies  
achievement of diversity-related goals  
strengthened curricular offerings (general education, developmental, Honors, study in minor or major)  
fit with, movement toward institutional mission and goals  
positive interdepartmental or inter-unit collaboration (e.g., academic affairs/student affairs)  
general response - level of satisfaction, perceived benefits and/or challenges  
understanding (degree to which institution is aware of, understands program)  
**INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL**

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# Questions for discussion

1. Look over the outcomes for learning communities on these “staircases.”

On your campus, what goals do LC programs typically aspire to?

What goals are actually assessed?

2. How and when are there conversations on your campus about learning community goals (and the practices that would foster them)? Who participates in these conversations? LC program leaders? Professional assessment staff members? Faculty and staff members who serve on teaching teams? Students? Share ways you have set up these conversations and how this has influenced learning community work.
3. What evidence is being gathered now about learning community impact? What evidence would you like to gather in the future – and what’s pressing that work forward, or holding it back?
4. How are assessment results communicated to various stakeholder groups on campus?